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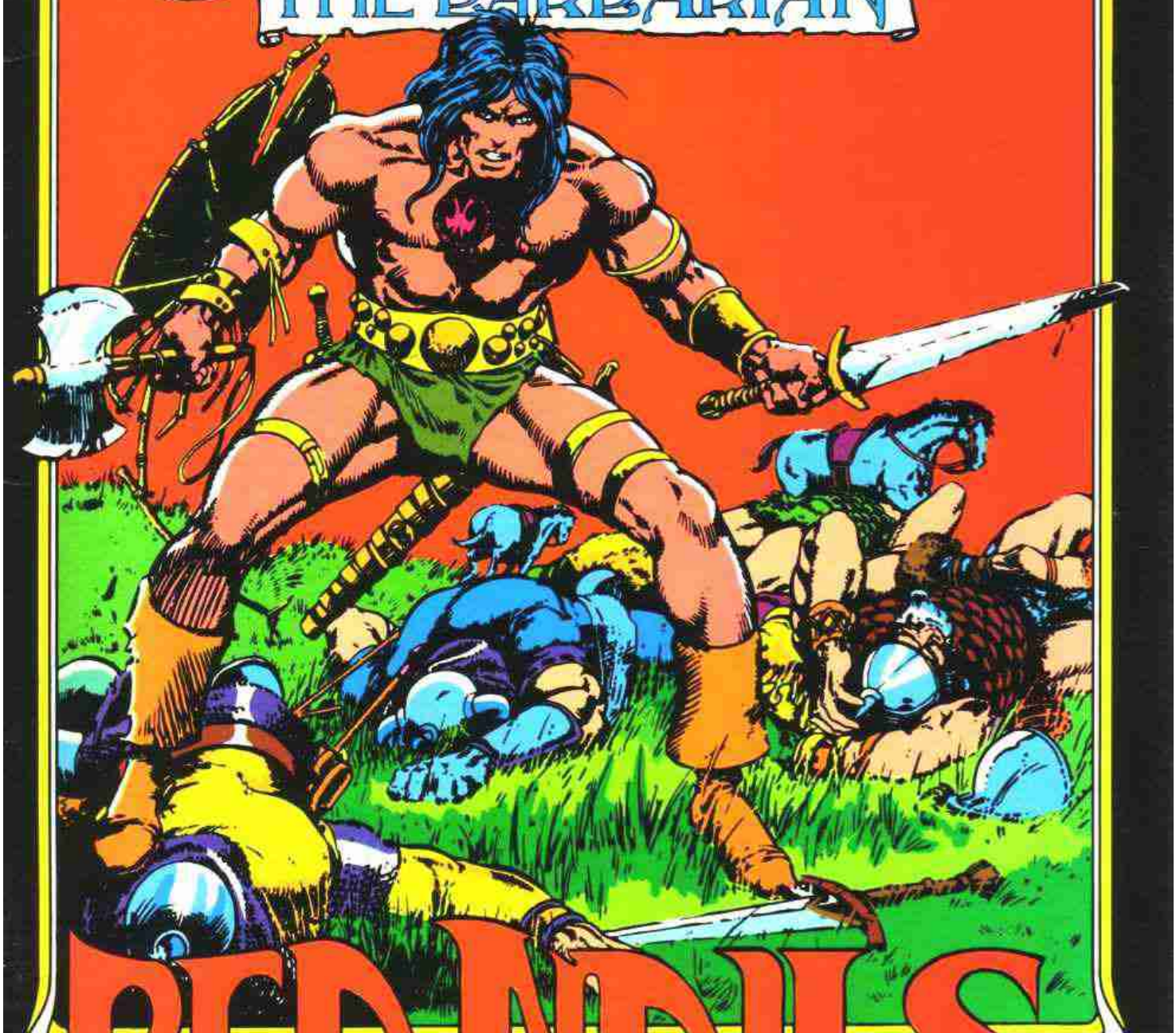
CONAN™

THE BARBARIAN



RED NAILS

A CONAN CLASSIC by ROY THOMAS & BARRY WINDSOR-SMITH

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WIND CHIMES IN HYBORIA

by Alan Zelenetz

There comes a time now and then in the life of every comic reader when he would just love, once and for all, to push a page or two under the nose of a whining skeptic in response to that question of ultimate irritation, "What do you see in that silly stuff anyway?" Well, dear reader, you are holding in your hands right this very moment an issue which is guaranteed to silence the most outspoken critic of the four colored world of comic books. Just show any page of this — Barry Windsor-Smith's brilliant rendering of Robert E. Howard's final CONAN tale, "Red Nails" — to aforementioned skeptic and watch him or her wriggle. For here is exquisitely portrayed a mysterious world of such fascination in a distinctive style so unique and convincing that only those who are sightless or without human heart can fail but be moved by it.

To sidestep for a moment. It is a paradox at the very heart of fantasy fiction that, unless there is a consistent and convincing (read "realistic") setting for the characters and their actions, the story may well drift apart in flights of unbridled fancy. In order for the elements of fantasy to succeed, they must be grounded in a recognizable world inhabited by characters and creatures whose attributes and abilities are carefully delineated. For example, when Conan confronts an unnatural monster, the only valid way you're going to have hackles raised on the audience's collective neck is if your hero is vulnerable, his situation believably desperate, and the monster so real you can smell him coming! It's not just a willing suspension of *disbelief* we're talking about but an actual embrace of the fantastic images as true for the span of the tale.

Robert E. Howard, Conan's creator, knew this well. As author Poul Anderson has said, Howard was a man blessed with a highly visual imagination. The world he created and what he treated of in his fantasy tales — as made up as it may have been — must have stood clearly before his eyes as he wrote. Well, heck, we've got some time — why not judge for yourself? Here's how Howard himself describes the approach of the dragon in the opening pages of "Red Nails":

> Through the thicket was thrust a head of nightmare and lunacy. Grinning jaws bared rows of dripping yellow tusks; above the yawning mouth wrinkled a saurian-like snout. Huge eyes, like those of a python a thousand times magnified, stared unwinkingly... Blood smeared the scaly, flabby lips and dripped from the huge mouth.
>
> The head, bigger than that of a crocodile, was further extended on a long scaled neck on which stood up rows of serrated spikes, and after it, crushing down the briars and saplings, waddled the body of a titan, a gigantic barrel-bellied torso on absurdly short legs. The whitish belly almost raked the ground, while the serrated back-bone rose higher than Conan could have reached on tiptoe. A long spiked tail, like that of a gargantuan scorpion, trailed out behind.

Do you see what I mean? Adjective for adjective, detail for detail, you've just gotta believe in that baby!

Now what happens when you're ready to adapt this scene to the visual medium of the comic book, and the pen and pencil just happen to belong to one Barry Windsor-Smith whose own ample visual imagination is attested to by page after page between these covers (as well as twenty-two color issues of CONAN THE BARBARIAN and numerous black and white stories in SAVAGE TALES from which we are reprinting this current tale, "Red Nails")? You're no longer talking about *blessings* of the imagination but downright *miracles!* For here is an artist whose painstaking attention to detail and meticulous concern for the realistic portrayal of other-worldly imagery produce the pictorial equivalent of Howard's prose poetry. Smith's dragon — modeled on a prehistoric stegosaurus — is believable indeed, and note how the background details, the bushes through which the dragon breaks, for example, are rendered with such loving fidelity to nature that the fleshy, lumbering beast takes on an added touch of reality in this recognizably real context. And though Smith himself has claimed never to have re-thought Howard's Conan at all, but rather to have employed Conan and the associated imagery of the stories in his own way, still one gets the distinct impression that here are two men of similar sensitivity, and the powerful blending of the artistry of the two becomes almost painfully beautiful.

'Painfully beautiful' — indeed, here is perhaps an apt expression for the weird and magical realms of Barry Smith's interpretation of Howard's ancient Hyboria, a rough-hewn world of brutal, rugged self-survival that is intruded upon so often by the sorcerous, the impalpable, the otherworldly. It is a place of rock and crag and vast desert and stormy sea, and at the same time of far off civilizations, exotic and decadent, almost mirage-like in their fluttering, shimmering decay. And through this world passes Smith's Conan, as he himself calls him, "a lean hero" not the brawny, brawling barbarian John Buscema was later to impress upon our imaginations. And yet it is not inconceivable that Smith's Conan would, through time and experience, become Buscema's, for Smith's style seems somehow suited to the more youthful Conan in the barbarian-thief phase of his life as Buscema's does to the mercenary and the king. Smith gives us a limber young man striding forth into the world, his every nerve atingle with the pleasures and the pains of the senses. And so, Smith places Conan in a world so sensually alive, so rich in color and shape and texture that

(continued on inside back cover)

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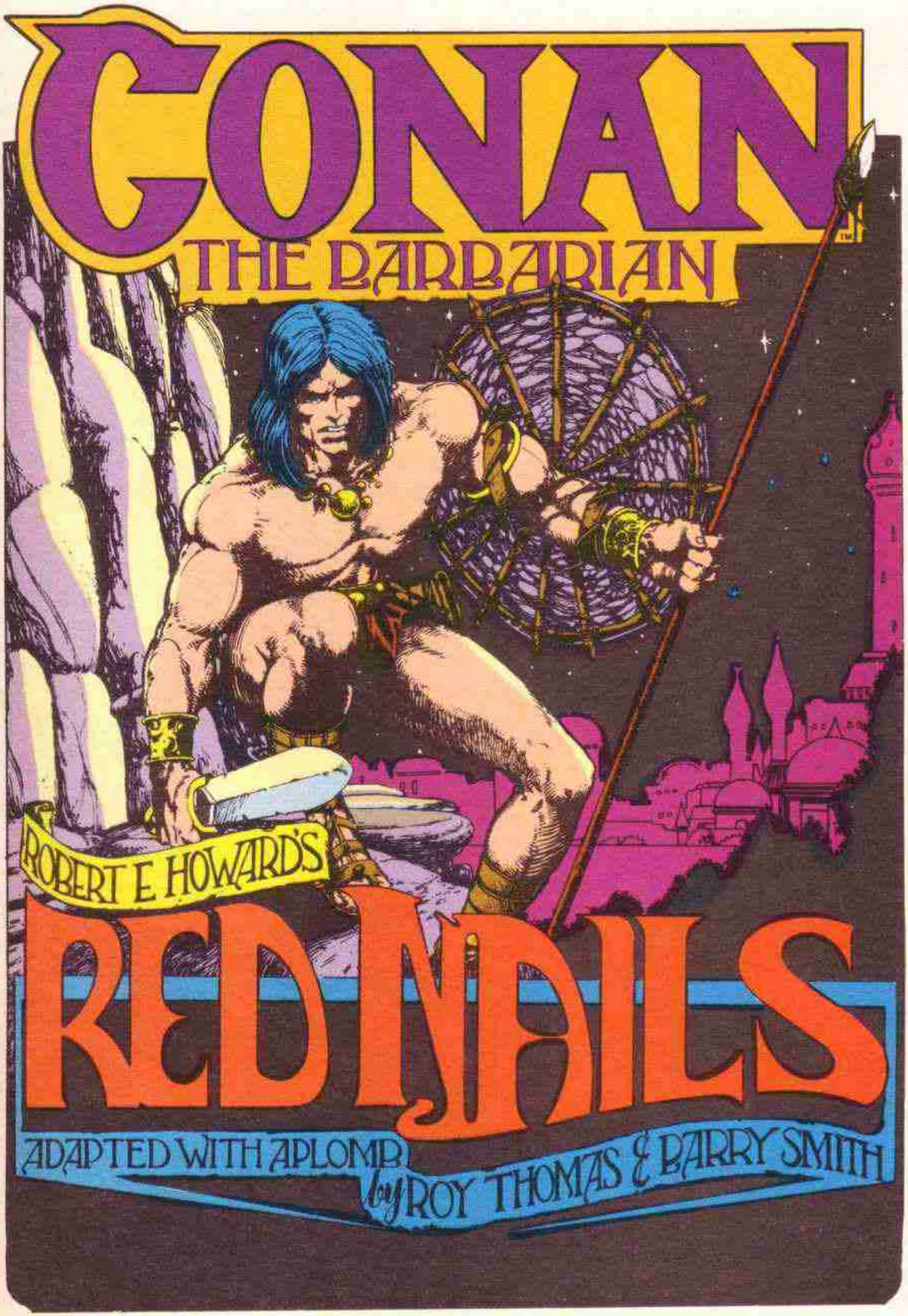

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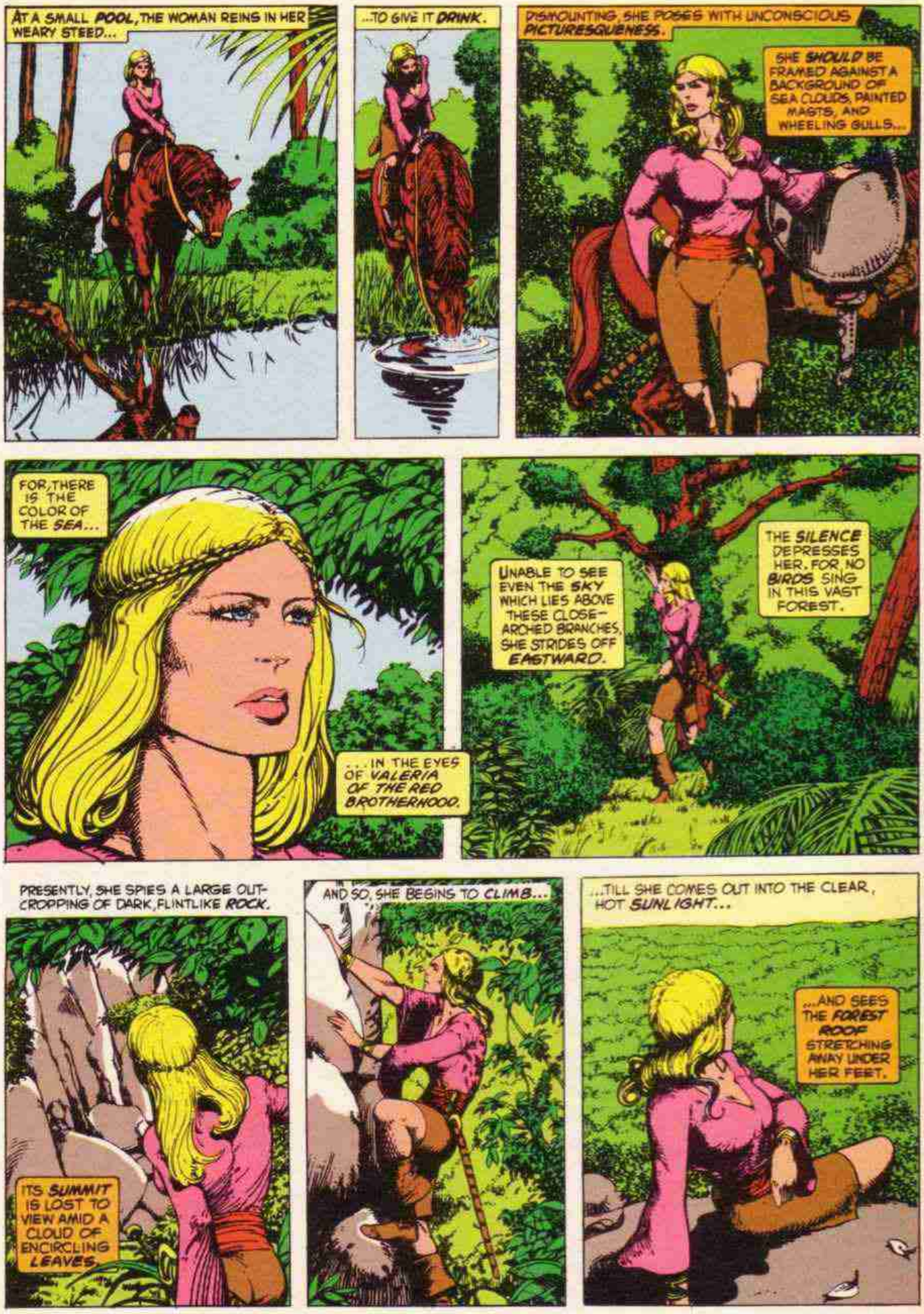
AT A SMALL POOL, THE WOMAN REINS IN HER WEARY STEED...
...TO GIVE IT DRINK.
DISMOUNTING, SHE POSES WITH UNCONSCIOUS PICTURESQUENESS.
SHE SHOULD BE FRAMED AGAINST A BACKGROUND OF SEA CLOUDS, PAINTED MASTS, AND WHEELING GULLS...
FOR, THERE IS THE COLOR OF THE SEA...
...IN THE EYES OF VALERIA OF THE RED BROTHERHOOD.
UNABLE TO SEE EVEN THE SKY WHICH LIES ABOVE THESE CLOSE-ARCHED BRANCHES, SHE STRIDES OFF EASTWARD.
THE SILENCE DEPRESSES HER. FOR NO BIRDS SING IN THIS VAST FOREST.
PRESENTLY, SHE SPIES A LARGE OUT-CROPPING OF DARK, FLINTLIKE ROCK.
ITS SUMMIT IS LOST TO VIEW AMID A CLOUD OF ENCIRCLING LEAVES.
AND SO, SHE BEGINS TO CLIMB...
...TILL SHE COMES OUT INTO THE CLEAR, HOT SUNLIGHT...
...AND SEES THE FOREST ROOF STRETCHING AWAY UNDER HER FEET.

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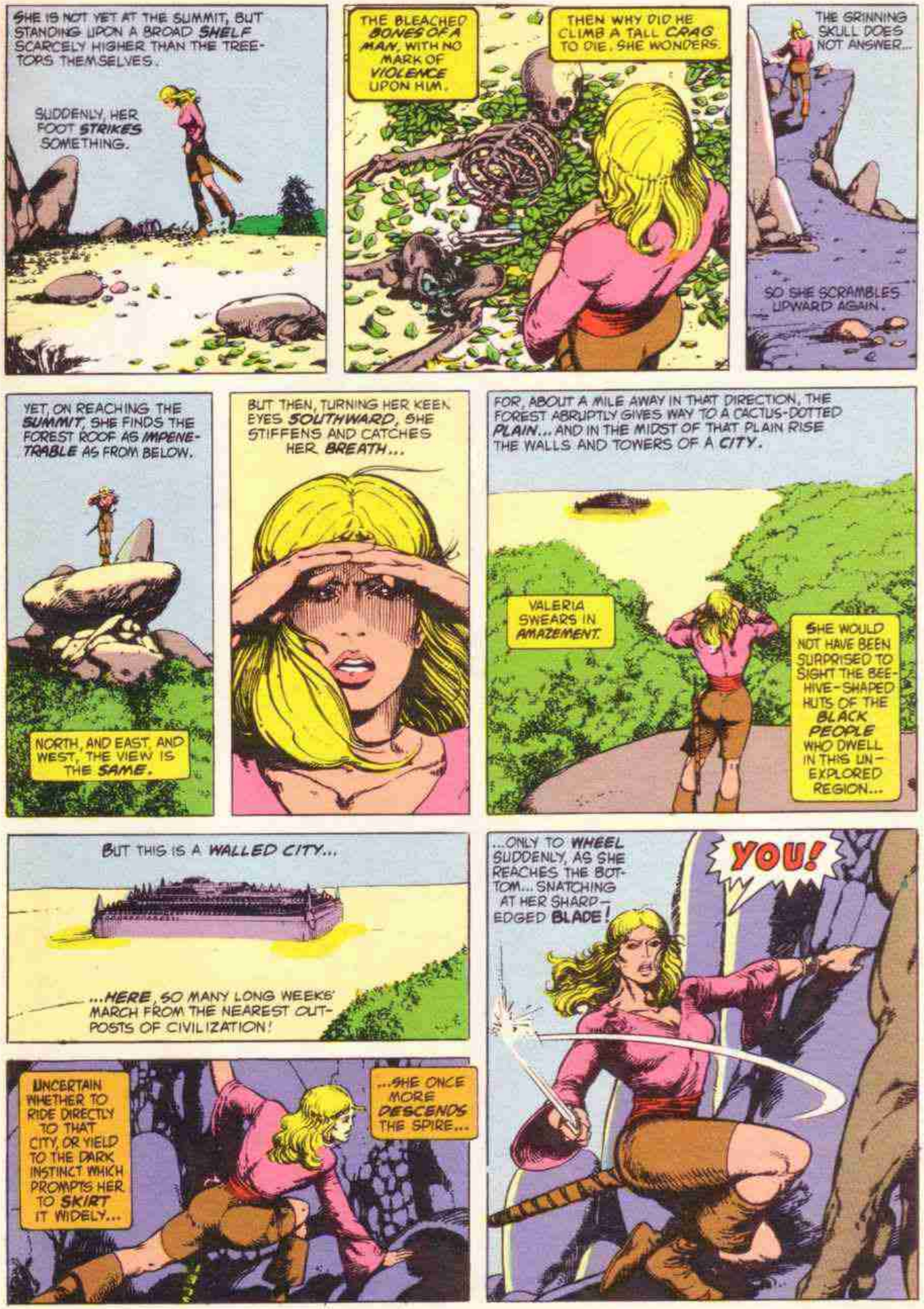
SHE IS NOT YET AT THE SUMMIT, BUT STANDING UPON A BROAD SHELF SCARCELY HIGHER THAN THE TREE-TOPS THEMSELVES.
SUDDENLY, HER FOOT STRIKES SOMETHING.
THE BLEACHED BONES OF A MAN, WITH NO MARK OF VIOLENCE UPON HIM.
THEN WHY DID HE CLIMB A TALL CRAG TO DIE, SHE WONDERS.
THE GRINNING SKULL DOES NOT ANSWER...
SO SHE SCRAMBLES UPWARD AGAIN.
YET, ON REACHING THE SUMMIT, SHE FINDS THE FOREST ROOF AS IMPENETRABLE AS FROM BELOW.
NORTH, AND EAST, AND WEST, THE VIEW IS THE SAME.
BUT THEN, TURNING HER KEEN EYES SOUTHWARD, SHE STIFFENS AND CATCHES HER BREATH...
FOR, ABOUT A MILE AWAY IN THAT DIRECTION, THE FOREST ABRUPTLY GIVES WAY TO A CACTUS-DOTTED PLAIN... AND IN THE MIDST OF THAT PLAIN RISE THE WALLS AND TOWERS OF A CITY.
VALERIA SWEARS IN AMAZEMENT.
SHE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SURPRISED TO SIGHT THE BEE-HIVE-SHAPED HUTS OF THE BLACK PEOPLE WHO DWELL IN THIS UN-EXPLORED REGION...
BUT THIS IS A WALLED CITY...
...HERE, SO MANY LONG WEEKS' MARCH FROM THE NEAREST OUT-POSTS OF CIVILIZATION!
...ONLY TO WHEEL SUDDENLY, AS SHE REACHES THE BOTTOM... SNATCHING AT HER SHARP-EDGED BLADE!
YOU!
UNCERTAIN WHETHER TO RIDE DIRECTLY TO THAT CITY, OR YIELD TO THE DARK INSTINCT WHICH PROMPTS HER TO SKIRT IT WIDELY...
...SHE ONCE MORE DESCENDS THE SPIRE...

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WHAT ARE YOU DOING ON MY TRAIL, CONAN OF CIMMERIA?
DON'T YOU KNOW?
DIDN'T I MAKE MY ADMIRATION FOR YOU PLAIN, BACK IN SUKHMET?
A STALLION COULD HAVE MADE IT NO PLAINER!
BUT WHY HAVE YOU FOLLOWED ME SO MANY LEAGUES?
WHEN YOU KNIFED THAT STYGIAN OFFICER WHO LAID HANDS ON YOU, YOU BECAME AN OUTLAW!
WHAT'S WORSE: WHEN YOU FLED SUKHMET, THE STYGIAN'S BROTHER FOLLOWED YOU TO SLIT YOUR PRETTY THROAT!
YOU'RE LYING... OR ELSE HE'D HAVE CAUGHT UP WITH ME BY NOW!
NOT LIKELY. I KILLED HIM YESTERDAY AND LEFT HIS CARCASS FOR THE VULTURES.
BUT, THAT'S ENOUGH TALKING FOR ONE DAY...
I WANT YOU, WOMAN...
AND I'VE NOT COME THIS FAR, JUST TO TURN AROUND AND RIDE OFF EMPTY-HANDED.
SO BE SENSIBLE, WENCH. I'M NOT GOING TO HARM Y--
KEEP BACK, YOU BARBARIAN DOG-- OR I'LL SPIT YOU LIKE A ROAST PIG!
DO YOU WANT ME TO TAKE THAT TOY AWAY FROM YOU, AND SPANK YOU WITH IT?
NO LIVING MAN CAN DISARM VALERIA WITH HIS BARE HANDS!
CONAN KNOWS SHE SPEAKS THE TRUTH...
STILL, HE STARTS TOWARD HER. HIS ANGRY PASSION MAKING HIM RECKLESS. SHE POISES FOR A DEADLY THRUST...
...WHEN SUDDENLY, THIS LUCICROUS YET PERILOUS SCENE IS INTERRUPTED...
...BY AN APPALLING MEDLEY OF SCREAMS...
WHAT'S THAT?
OUR HORSES!!

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YES, IT IS THE SCREAMS OF HORSES THEY HEAR...
HORSES IN TERROR AND AGONY... AND, MINGLED WITH THEIR SCREAMS, THE SNAP OF SPLINTERING BONES!
LIONS ARE SLAYING OUR HORSES!
LIONS, NOTHING! LIONS ROAR BEFORE THEY STRIKE!
THE SCREAMS HAVE CEASED, BUT THAT NEW SOUND--
SOME-THING'S EATING OUR HORSES!
CONAN! THE WIND HAS SHIFTED...!
...CARRYING OUR SCENT RIGHT TO WHATEVER'S UP AHEAD!
...IT MUST HAVE SMELLED US OUT ALREADY!
THE EATING SOUNDS HAVE STOPPED.
MITRA! THE WAY THOSE TREES ARE SHAKING-- THE THING'S AS BIG AS AN ELEPHANT!
WHAT THE DEVIL--?
THEN SUDDENLY, THROUGH THE THICKET IS THRUST A HEAD BORN OF NIGHTMARE AND LUNACY--
CROM! IT'S--A DRAGON!
BACK UP THE CRAG-- QUICK! AND DON'T STOP TILL YOU REACH THE TOP!!
WHY? I DON'T THINK THAT THING CAN CLIMB--!

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MAYBE NOT... BUT IF HE STOP, HE CAN STAND ON HIS HIND LEGS AND REACH US!
I--SEE WHAT YOU MEAN!
EASY, GIRL! I'VE GOT YOU.
BUT, THE WHOLE CRAG IS SHAKING SO! I--
HERE HE COMES AGAIN!
RAISE THAT WELL-TURNED LEG, UNLESS YOU WANT TO LOSE IT!
HE--HE CAN CLIMB! THEN WE'RE DOOMED!
NO--SEE? ALREADY HE'S SLIDING BACK DOWN THE ROCK!
IT WAS JUST HIS SPEED THAT CARRIED HIM UP THIS HIGH FOR A MOMENT.
NOW SEE HOW HE SQUATS AT THE FOOT OF THE CRAG, STARING UNBLINKINGLY UP AT US...
HOW LONG DO YOU SUPPOSE HE'LL CROUCH THERE?
I COULDN'T SAY...
BETTER ASK THIS SKELETON AT OUR FEET. POOR DEVIL MUST HAVE DIED OF STARVATION!
THEN, THE DRAGON WON'T LEAVE--
--TILL ALL THE FLESH HAS ROTTED OFF OUR DEAD BONES.
IT CAN'T BE! I CAN'T HAVE FOUGHT A THOUSAND BATTLES...
...STORMED HIGH-WALLED CITIES, AND CUT OUT THE TONGUE OF A MAN WHO LEERED AT ME...
...JUST TO DIE UP HERE, LIKE THIS!?

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NO, BY MITRA! I'LL CUT OFF HIS DAMNED HEAD! I'LL CLIMB BACK DOWN THERE AND--OHHH!
YOU'LL SIT DOWN, WENCH--AND YOU'LL KEEP QUIET!
VALERIA IS TOO SHOCKED EITHER TO RESIST...
...OR REPULSE CONAN'S CARESSES.
AT LEAST WE WON'T STARVE. THAT FRUIT...
--WOULD KILL US EVEN FASTER THAN THE BITE OF THE DRAGON!
THOSE ARE CALLED THE APPLES OF DERKETA, QUEEN OF THE DEAD.
THE DEADLIEST POISON THIS SIDE OF KHITAI.
OH.
THINK YOU KNOW IT ALL, DON'T YOU, BARBARIAN?
TAKE YOUR SWEATY HANDS OFF ME LONG ENOUGH TO CLIMB THAT PEAK, AND YOU'LL GET A SURPRISE.
THIS IS A DAY FOR SURPRISES...
...SO I'LL DO JUST THAT.
HAH! IT'S A WALLED CITY, RIGHT ENOUGH--BUT NO HERDS, OR SIGN OF PEOPLE.
NOT THAT THE BLACK MEN WHO PROBABLY LIVE THERE WOULD HELP US IF THEY COULD.
THEY'D JUST STICK US FULL OF SPEARS, BEFORE WE COULD--
SPEARS! I SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF THAT BEFORE!
SHOWS WHAT A PRETTY WOMAN DOES TO A MAN'S MIND.
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
THE APPLES OF DERKETA, WENCH.
WE CAN'T EAT THEM--BUT THEY CAN BE PUT TO OTHER USE, ALONG WITH THESE BRANCHES--
--IF BROTHER DRAGON WILL JUST STOP FROM LUNGING AT ME A FEW SECONDS LONGER!
THERE!

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THESE BRANCHES ARE TOO LIGHT FOR SPEAR-HAFTS. BUT, ONCE I BIND ENOUGH OF THEM WITH THESE CREEPERS...
...AND WEDGE MY SWORD INTO ONE END...
...I'LL USE THESE LUSCIOUS RED APPLES...
...TO PROVE THERE'S MORE THAN ONE WAY TO SKIN A PANTHER.
HO, DRAGON! WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR DOWN THERE, YOU MISBEGOTTEN SON OF A WATER-SNAKE?
CONAN--WHAT--?
HUSH, GIRL, AND WATCH.
STICK THAT UGLY SNOUT UP HERE AGAIN, LIZARD-DROPPINGS...
...AND YOU'LL NEVER STICK IT ANYWHERE ELSE!
I HOPE.
CONAN'S SHOUTS HAVE THEIR EFFECT--AS THE MONSTER RISES UP WITH ASTONISHING SWIFTNESS, IN A FURIOUS EFFORT TO REACH THIS VOCIFEROUS PIGMY...
BUT, THE CIMMERIAN HAS JUDGED HIS DISTANCE WITH PRECISION.
SOME FIVE FEET BELOW HIM, THAT MIGHTY HEAD CRASHES TERRIBLY BUT FUTILELY THRU THE LEAVES.
AND, AS THAT MONSTROUS MOUTH GAPES LIKE THAT OF A GREAT SERPENT--

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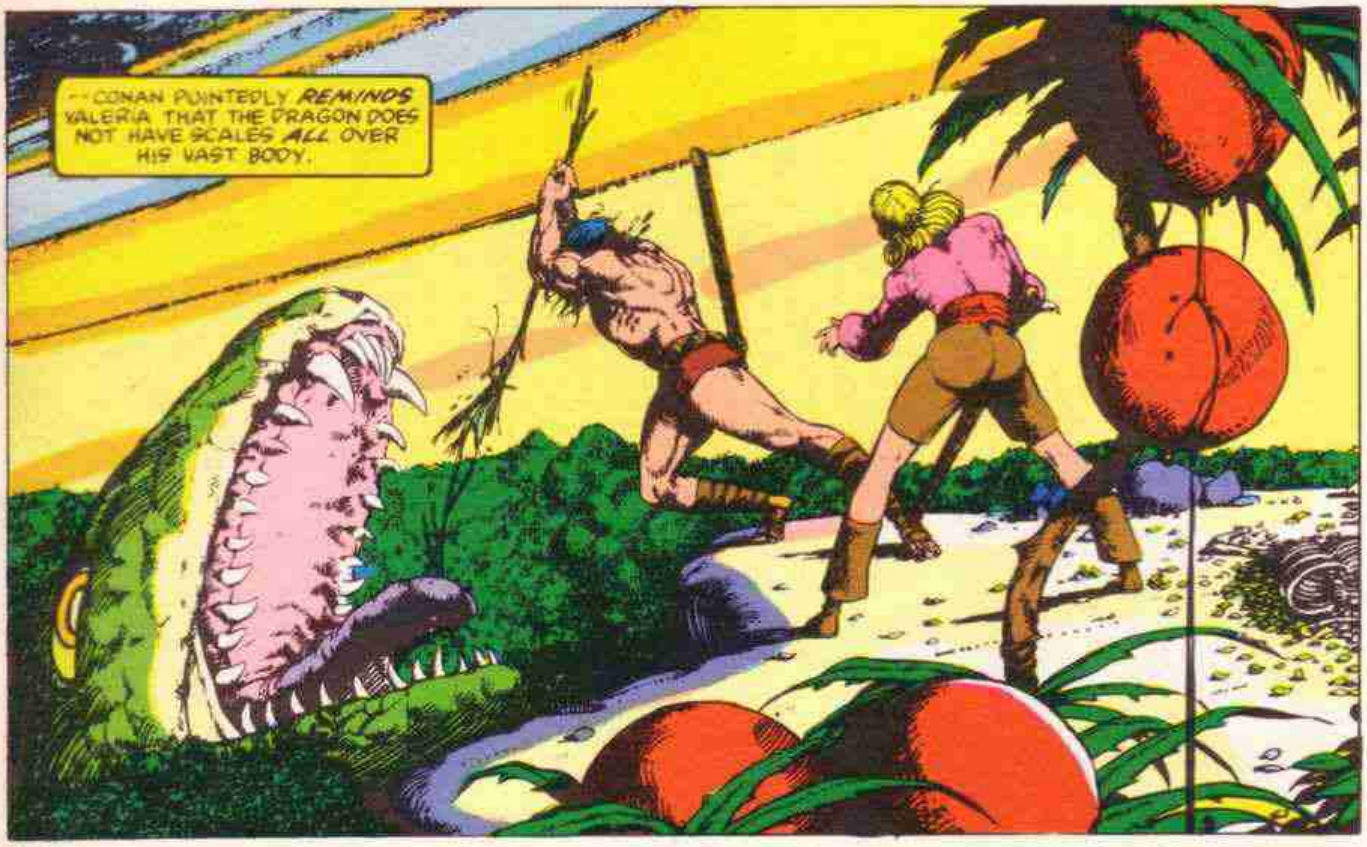

HIS LONG TONGUE SKEWERED BY THE NON-SHATTERED MAKESHIFT SPEAR, THE DRAGON SLIDES BACK DOWN THE CRAG...
...AND ONLY VALERIA'S OUTSTRETCHED HAND STOPS AN ILL-BALANCED CONAN FROM JOINING HIM.

VALERIA MARVELS AT CONAN'S SWIFT DESCENT, FOR SHE HAS NEVER SEEN A CIMMERIAN CLIMB BEFORE.
YET, THE BARBARIAN IS SCARCELY LESS AWED BY HER OWN PROWESS...THOUGH HE DOESN'T EXACTLY SHOW IT.
HURRY, WOMAN! I NEVER YET SAW THE FEMALE WHO DIDN'T RUN LIKE A PREGNANT CAMEL.
AND, IF THE WIND SHIFTS BEFORE WE REACH THAT CITY, HE'LL BE RIGHT BACK ON OUR TRAIL!

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THEN MITRA GRANT THAT THE WIND DOES NOT CHANGE.
THE GODS, THEY SAY, ANSWER ALL PRAYERS...
BUT OFTTIMES, THE ANSWER THEY GIVE IS A RESOUNDING NO...
AND SO, WITHOUT WARNING, THE WIND SHIFTS...!
DAMN!
AND, ALMOST INSTANTLY, A HORRIBLE ROAR SHAKES THE DARK FOREST BEYOND...
HE SCENTS US!
THEN RUN! IT'S ALL WE CAN DO!
ON SECOND THOUGHT, YOUR LIFE AT SEA HAS HARDLY MADE A RUNNER OF YOU--
--SO MAYBE I'D BETTER DO THE FLEEING FOR BOTH OF US!
BEHIND THEM, THE CRASHING SOUNDS TURN INTO ROLLING THUNDER, AS THE MONSTER BREAKS OUT OF THE THICKETS...
...AND INTO MORE OPEN GROUND.
MOREOVER, THE ADDED WEIGHT HAS SLOWED DOWN EVEN THE SWIFT-FOOTED CIMMERIAN...
AND SO, EVEN AS CONAN SEEMS TO SENSE THE HOT BREATH OF DOOM BREATHING DOWN HIS NECK--
HE SUDDENLY HURLS THE WOMAN FROM HIM WITH ALL HIS MIGHT--
--AND WHEELS IN THE PATH OF THE THUNDERING TITAN!

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LIKE A FEAR-CRAZED TIGER, HE LEAPS -- SLASHING WITH HIS BLADE AS IF IT WERE SOME REAPER'S SCYTHE...
--FEELS THAT SWORD CUT DEEP INTO THE SCALES THAT SHEATHE A MIGHTY SNOUT...!
BUT THEN--
--A FEARSOME IMPACT SENDS THE BRONZED WARRIOR SPRAWLING HEADLONG--
AND, CHARGING ON, THE MONSTER STRIKES A STURDY TREE...
...WHICH, EVEN IN BREAKING, DASHES OUT THE BRAINS FROM ITS MISSHAPEN SKULL.
CONAN'S THOUGHTS, THOUGH, ARE ONLY OF...
VALERIA!
ARE YOU... ALL RIGHT, GIRL?
I AM... IF THAT THING... IS DEAD, AT LAST...!
IF IT CAN DIE, THEN IT HAS DIED.
WE'LL FIND OUT. FOR WE MUST PASS IT!

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M-MUST WE? ITS TAIL STILL THRASHES..!
IT'S DEAD, I TELL YOU.
BUT IT MAY HAVE BROTHERS BACK IN THE FOREST, SO...
AH, I DIDN'T THINK I'D HAVE TO FINISH THAT THOUGHT.
AS THEY WALK ON, VALERIA LISTENS FOR A THUNDEROUS TREAD BEHIND HER. CONAN'S MIND, HOWEVER IS ON OTHER THINGS.
NO CATTLE, NO PLOWED FIELDS...
HOW DO THE PEOPLE OF THIS CITY LIVE?
PERHAPS THERE ARE FIELDS ON THE OTHER SIDE...?
MAYBE. WELL, THIS RING OF CACTUS WILL SHELTER US TILL DAWN.
NO USE REACHING THOSE GATES IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.
AND IF A DRAGON COMES?
I'LL KEEP WATCH.
WE'LL KEEP WATCH, YOU MEAN.
WAKE ME... WHEN THE MOON... IS AT ITS ZENITH...
...AND I'LL SPELL ...YOU...
...YOU DIDN'T WAKE ME LAST NIGHT. WHY?
YOU NEEDED SLEEP MORE THAN ONE WHO HAS OFTEN LIVED IN THE SADDLE.
NOW, SHUT UP AND EAT YOUR CACTUS.
DONE? GOOD. THEN LET'S BE OFF.
IF THAT CITY'S PEOPLE ARE GOING TO SLIT OUR THROATS...
...THEY MAY AS WELL DO IT BE-FORE IT GETS TOO HOT.

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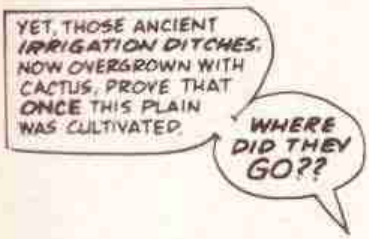
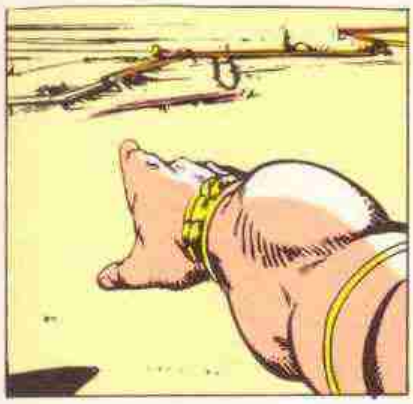
AT LEAST OUR FOES WILL BE MEN... AND I'VE NEVER MET ONE OF THOSE I FEARED.
BLACK LAST NIGHT AGAINST THE MOON...
...AND BLOOD-RED AGAINST THE SUN THIS DAWN.
I DO NOT LIKE THIS CITY, VALERIA.


YET, THOSE ANCIENT IRRIGATION DITCHES, NOW OVERGROWN WITH CACTUS, PROVE THAT ONCE THIS PLAIN WAS CULTIVATED.
WHERE DID THEY GO??



NOTHING BUT A LONG, BROAD HALL--SO LONG ITS NETHER END IS LOST IN DISTANCE.
CONAN-- YOUR SWORD GLITTERS IN THE GREENISH GLOW OF THE WALLS. WHAT--?
JADE.

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JADE, OR I'M A SHEMITE!
PRECIOUS JADE? SURELY NOT IN SUCH QUANTITIES..!
I'VE LOOTED ENOUGH KHITIAN CARAVANS TO KNOW JADE WHEN I SEE IT, GIRL.
NOW THAT'S CURIOUS. THIS DOOR WAS BOLTED FROM WITHIN.
THE PEOPLE MUST HAVE LEFT THRU ANOTHER DOOR.
WHAT'S INSIDE THESE ROOF-REACHING HOUSES, I WONDER?
NO BETTER TIME FOR FINDING OUT...
MORE JADE-- REFLECTING GHOSTLY GLEAMS FROM THE SKYLIGHTS HIGH ABOVE!
GIVE ME A SMALL CHUNK OF THIS ROOM, AND I'LL RETIRE FOR LIFE.
AND I'LL BUY MYSELF A HYBORIAN KINGDOM AND GROW FAT AND LAZY.
JUST THE SAME...
... I WISH WE'D COME TO A STREET.

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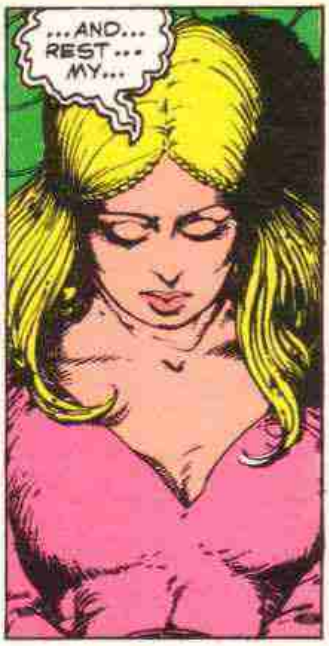
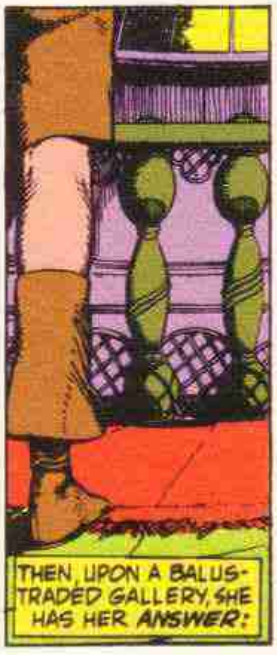
AT LEAST WE KNOW THE CITY'S PEOPLE DIDN'T DIE OF PLAGUE, OR ELSE WE'D FIND SKELETONS.
MAYBE IT BECAME HAUNTED, AND THEY FLED. MAYBE--
MAYBE, HELL! WE'LL NEVER KNOW.

LOOK AT THESE FRIEZES. THEY PORTRAY MEN-- BUT OF WHAT RACE?
EASTERNERS, I'D GUESS. BUT, FROM THESE SCENES, THEY MUST HAVE LIVED A DISGUSTINGLY PEACEFUL LIFE.



AS SHE DRIFTS OFF INTO HALF-SLEEP, VALERIA WONDERS IDLY WHAT DARK DEEDS, WHAT UNGUESSED SECRETS THOSE WINKING CEILING-GEMS ONCE BLAZED DOWN UPON.

CONAN HAS NOT RETURNED.
BUT SOMEHOW, SHE KNOWS IT WAS NOT HE WHOM SHE HEARD. FOR THE CIMMERIAN MOVES NOISELESSLY AS A PANTHER.



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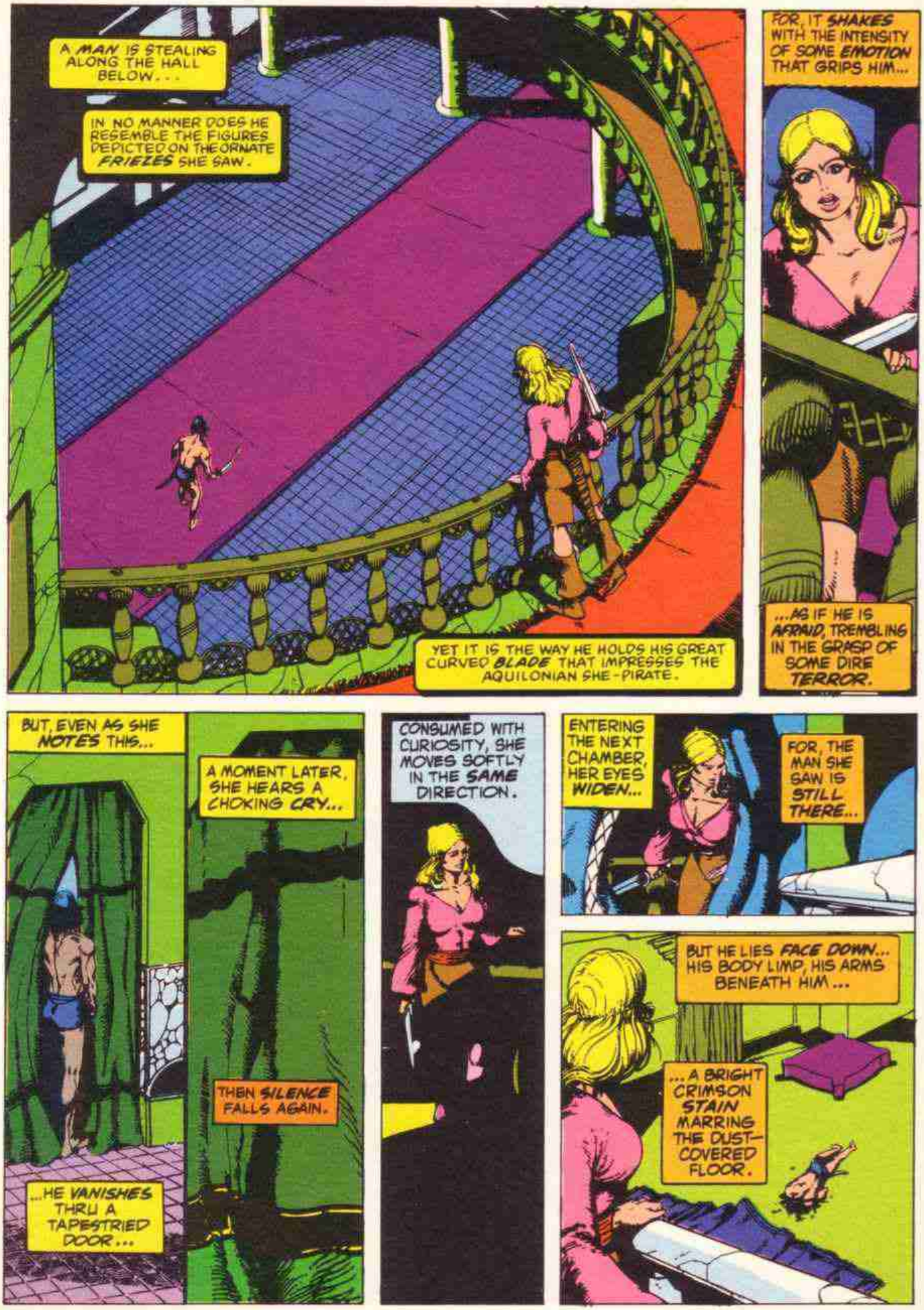
A MAN IS STEALING ALONG THE HALL BELOW...
IN NO MANNER DOES HE RESEMBLE THE FIGURES DEPICTED ON THE ORNATE FRIEZES SHE SAW.
YET IT IS THE WAY HE HOLDS HIS GREAT CURVED BLADE THAT IMPRESSES THE AQUILONIAN SHE-PIRATE.
FOR, IT SHAKES WITH THE INTENSITY OF SOME EMOTION THAT GRIPS HIM...
...AS IF HE IS AFRAID, TREMBLING IN THE GRASP OF SOME DIRE TERROR.
BUT, EVEN AS SHE NOTES THIS...
...HE VANISHES THRU A TAPESTRIED DOOR...
A MOMENT LATER, SHE HEARS A CHOKING CRY...
THEN SILENCE FALLS AGAIN.
CONSUMED WITH CURIOSITY, SHE MOVES SOFTLY IN THE SAME DIRECTION.
ENTERING THE NEXT CHAMBER, HER EYES WIDEN...
FOR, THE MAN SHE SAW IS STILL THERE...
BUT HE LIES FACE DOWN... HIS BODY LIMP, HIS ARMS BENEATH HIM...
...A BRIGHT CRIMSON STAIN MARRING THE DUST-COVERED FLOOR.

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SUDDENLY, FROM THE OPPOSITE DOORWAY, ANOTHER FIGURE BURSTS IN...
AT FIRST, SHE THINKS IT IS CONAN...
BUT IT IS A SMALLER, GAUNTER MAN, LIKE THE FIRST...!
CHICMEC!
THEN, THE MAN FREEZES...
...AND, IMMOBILE AS AN IMAGE, STARES AHEAD WITH DILATED EYES.
...AT A GLEAMING SKELETON STANDING THERE, SPECTRAL BLADE IN HAND!
INSTINCTIVELY, HE REACHES FOR HIS OWN WEAPON...
...THEN HALTS AS IF MESMERIZED...
AND VALERIA FEELS HER HAIR STIR, AS THAT HELLISH APPARITION NOW SWEEPS ACROSS THE ROOM TOWARD ITS PREY...
THE MAN DUMBLY FACES THE SKELETON WITH ITS GRINNING, MISSHAPEN SKULL...
...AS IT RAISES HIGH ITS GLISTENING SWORD...
...LIKE A VISION OF DEATH...
...TRIUMPHANT OVER MANKIND!

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VALERIA ACTS ACCORDING TO THE FIRST IMPULSE OF HER WAYWARD NATURE...
WITH ONE TIGERISH MOVEMENT, SHE IS OVER THE BALUSTRADE...
...AND ONTO THE FLOOR!
HOLD, DEVIL!
THEN, EVEN AS IT WHEELS TO FACE HER--
--HER BLADE LASHES OUT--
AND A FIERCE EXULTATION SWEEPS HER, AS SHE FEELS IT CLEAVE SOLID FLESH AND MORTAL BONE!
WITH A GURGLING CRY, THE APPARITION GOES DOWN...
...AND THE GLOWING SKULL ROLLS CLEAR!
YOU HAVE SLAIN THE BURNING SKULL!
AND IT WAS BUT A MAN, AFTER ALL!
WHAT DID YOU THINK IT WAS?
WE THOUGHT IT A DEMON--ONE THAT THEY HAD CONJURED UP OUT OF THE CATACOMBS!
BUT, WHO ARE YOU? A GODDESS? A DEVIL--?
MY NAME IS VALERIA, AND I'M NO DEVIL.
YOU SPEAK SOME STYGIAN DIALECT. THEN HOW--?
SHHH... LISTEN! THEY ARE WEST OF THE GREAT HALL!
THEY MAY BE CREEPING UPON US, EVEN NOW!
I HEAR NOTHING. WHO ARE "THEY"?

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THEY? WHY, THE PEOPLE OF XOTALANC-- THEY WHO DWELL BY THE EASTERN GATE!
THE CLAN OF THE MAN YOU SLEW!
NOW HURRY, BEFORE--
WAIT A MINUTE, LITTLE MAN! WHO ARE YOU, AND WHERE WOULD YOU TAKE ME?
ANSWER ME, OR BY HEAVEN I'LL SPLIT YOUR SKULL, AS WELL!
I--I AM TECHOTL.
I AM OF TECUHLTLI, THE PLACE BY THE WESTERN GATE..!
WE TWO CAME INTO THE HALLS OF SILENCE TO AMBUSH SOME MEN OF XOTALANC...
WE BECAME SEPARATED, AND THE BURNING SKULL SLEW CHICMEC!
LET ME SEE THAT SKULL...
NO!
DO NOT TOUCH IT--OR EVEN LOOK ON IT!
DEATH LURKS IN IT!
THE WIZARDS OF XOTALANC FOUND IT IN THE CATACOMBS, WHERE LIE THE BONES OF THE DEMON-KINGS WHO RULED IN XUCHOTL, BLACK CENTURIES PAST.
TO GAZE ON IT FREEZES THE BLOOD, AND WITHERS THE BRAIN OF THE MAN WHO UNDERSTANDS NOT ITS MYSTERIES...
...AND TO TOUCH IT CAUSES MADNESS AND SURE DESTRUCTION!
ALL THAT-- FROM A MERE PIECE OF BONE?

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VALERIA GAZES AT THE SINISTER SKULL, SMOLDERING AND GLOWING ON THE FLOOR NEAR THE DEAD MAN.
IN LIFE, ITS WEARER MUST HAVE BORNE A MONSTROUS ASPECT.
THEN SUDDENLY, THE SKULL SEEMS TO GROW BRIGHTER... BRIGHTER...
...AS IF WITH A LIFE ALL ITS OWN!
ITS JAWS YAWN AT HER...
THEN SNAP TOGETHER, LIKE SOMETHING FROM A NIGHTMARE!
YES--A DREAM. IT-- ALL LIFE--IS BUT A DREAM.
DO NOT LOOK AT THE SKULL!
SHE FEELS ALMOST SHE COULD PLUNGE INTO THAT GRINNING ABYSS. SHE...
DO NOT LOOK AT IT!
ONCE IT HOUSED THE AWFUL BRAIN OF A KING OF MAGICIANS-- AND HIS POWER IS MIGHTY YET!
YES, I... I SEE THAT NOW.
THEN... THERE IS SOME-THING I MUST DO--
--AND IT IS THIS!
YET, EVEN AS THE SKULL IS CRUSHED TO FLAMING FRAGMENTS UNDER HER SWINGING SWORD...
...SOMEWHERE IN THE ROOM, OR IN THE VOID, OR IN THE DIM REACHES OF HER MIND, AN INHUMAN VOICE CRIES OUT IN PAIN AND RAGE!

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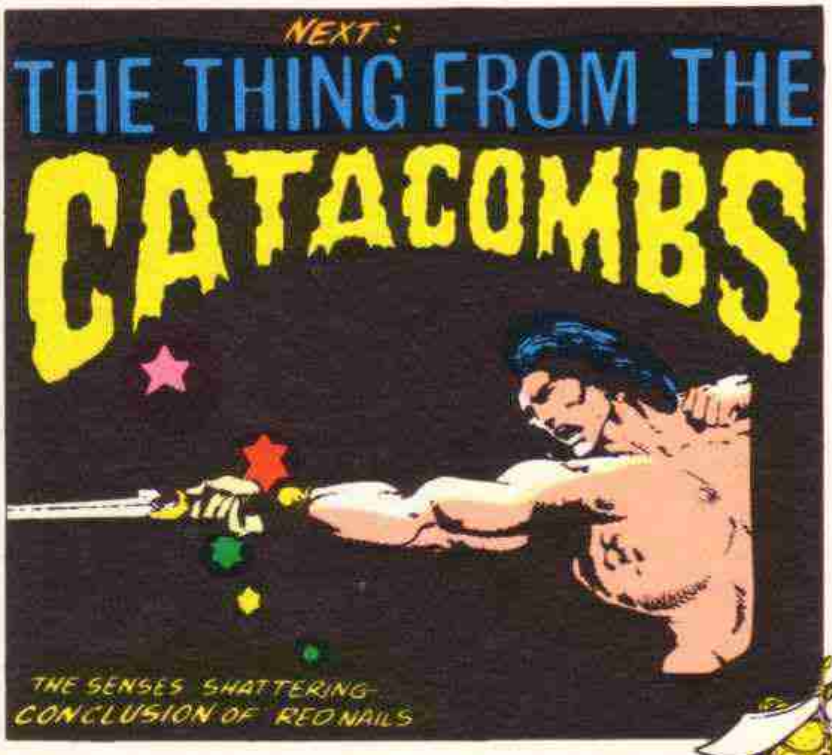
AIEEEEE! THE DARK GODS ARE ANGRY AT YOUR DEED!
LOOK! FEEL! GUSTS OF WIND COME SCREAMING IN--FROM NOWHERE!
SOMEONE MUST HAVE OPENED ONE OF THE OUTER DOORS AGAIN.
BUT, THE WORDS RING FALSE AND HOLLOW IN VALERIA'S VOICE...
AND SHE BREATHES MORE EASILY WHEN THE GUSTS DIE AGAIN...

FORGET HIM! HE IS DOUBTLESS DEAD AND DAMNED BY NOW! COME--
NO, I SAID! HE DIDN'T DESERT ME, DID HE?
STILL, IF WE COULD FIND HIM TOGETHER...

YES, BY MITRA! WE'LL SEEK HIM OUT--AND THEN TAKE OUR CHANCES WITH THE DRAGONS OUTSIDE.
I'LL NOT BREATHE EASY TILL HE AND I BID FAREWELL TO THIS CITY OF DEATH!
IF FIND HIM YOU CAN, VALERIA...
IF FIND HIM YOU CAN...!



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CONAN
THE BARBARIAN
THE UPPER CHAMBERS OF THE TIME-LOST CITY ARE EMPTY. DEVOID, AT LEAST, OF HUMAN LIFE-- THOUGH THE DUST OF SHADOWED CENTURIES STIRS SLIGHTLY AT CONAN'S PANTHER-LIKE TREAD.
AND THEN, FROM BELOW, HE HEARS THE HARSH, SHARP SOUNDS OF STRIFE--!
ROY THOMAS WRITER
BARRY SMITH artist
THE LURKER FROM THE CATACOMBS
ADAPTED FROM THE STORY "RED NAILS" BY ROBERT E. HOWARD, CREATOR OF CONAN

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BACK, HE RUNS, THRU CORRIDORS WHICH KNOW NOT NIGHT OR DAY, TOWARD THE PLACE WHERE HE LEFT A DOZING COMPANION...
... ONLY TO FIND HER GONE!
THEN DOWN-- THE CLASH OF SWORD ON SWORD EVER LOUDER HIS EARS--
--UNTIL HE SEES--
CROM!
--VALERIA OF THE RED BROTHERHOOD LOCKED IN A DEATH-DUEL WITH TWO DUSKY, NIGH-NAKED WARRIORS.
NOT FAR AWAY, TWO OTHERS STRUGGLE GRIMLY... BUT IT IS ONLY ON VALERIA THAT CONAN'S STEEL-BLUE EYES ARE FIXED!
VALERIA-- SHE WHO STILL TRADES BLOW FOR BLOW WITH A BLOOD-MADDENED SAVAGE--
--EVEN AS HIS WOUNDED COMRADE CLAWS AND BITES HER FROM WHERE HE SPRAWLS--!
VALERIA-- SHE WHOSE SEA-HUED EYES DANCE MADLY, AND WHOSE RUBY LIPS SMILE WITHOUT MERCY--
VALERIA-- SHE TO WHOM THE HUM OF STEEL IS LIKE A BRIDAL SONG!

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AND SO--
CONAN!
THEN AS FOR YOU, DOG OF HELL--
mercy!
WHAT IS ALL THIS, WOMAN? I LEAVE YOU ALONE FOR FIVE MINUTES, AND--
FIVE DEAD DOGS! FIVE SLAIN!
FIVE CRIMSON NAILS FOR THE BLACK PILLAR!
THE GOD OF BLOOD BE PRAISED!
AND WHO'S THIS MADMAN?
HIS NAME'S TECHOTL, FROM HIS BABBLING, I GATHER HIS PEOPLE LIVE AT ONE END OF THIS INSANE CITY--
--THOSE WE KILLED AND THEIR ILK, AT THE OTHER.
HE SEEMS FRIENDLY ENOUGH. MAYBE WE SHOULD GO WITH--
YES--YES! COME AWAY --NOW!
ALL TECUHLTLI WILL HONOR YOU BOTH!
THEN LEAD THE WAY, LITTLE MAN.
COME--HURRY! IT IS FAR TO TECUHLTLI.
AT ANY MOMENT, THE XOTALANCAS MAY COME ON US-- IN NUMBERS TOO GREAT EVEN FOR YOUR SWORDS.

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WHY DON'T WE GET OUT OF THIS INFERNAL PALACE, TECHOTL, AND TAKE TO THE STREETS?
THERE ARE NO STREETS IN XUCHOTL, OUTSIDER, BUT ONLY THE GREAT HALL...
...WHICH TRAVERSES THE CITY FROM NORTH GATE TO SOUTH GATE, THRU NEITHER OF WHICH ANY LIVING MAN HAS PASSED FOR FIFTY YEARS.

MITRA! WHAT SORT OF PLACE IS THIS, CONAN?
CROM KNOWS! BUT, I'D BET IT WASN'T HIS RACE THAT BUILT THIS GREAT ROOFED CITY.
SOFT NOW...
THE HALLS MAY BE FULL OF LURKING DEVILS.

DO YOU FEAR AN AMBUSH, LITTLE MAN?
YES-- FOR, THE HALLS OF SILENCE ARE A DISPUTED REGION. WHY DO YOU ASK?
BECAUSE I JUST HEARD STEEL CLINK AGAINST STONE.
THERE ARE MEN IN THE CHAMBERS AHEAD.

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TILL WITHOUT WARNING--
DAMN! MY FOOT STRUCK-- SOMETHING THAT FELT LIKE A HUMAN SKULL!
THEY'LL HAVE HEARD THE CLATTER. RUN!
IN FORCED SILENCE AND APPALLING DARKNESS THE THREE RACE ON...
AGAIN VALERIA FEELS HERSELF PROPELLED BY CONAN UP THE STAIRS HALF DRAGGED--
--HALF LIFTED.
FOR THERE ARE SOUNDS NOW HARD AT THEIR HEELS...
...SOUNDS NOT ALL MADE BY HUMAN FEET!
THEN, AS CONAN DROPS BACK, SOMETHING COMES WRITHING UNSEEN UP THE STAIRS AT HIM...
AND AS A BITTER CHILL STRIKES HIM LIKE A HAND FROM THE GRAVE...
HE SUDDENLY LASHES DOWN WITH HIS GREAT SWORD...
...FEELING THE BLADE SHEAR THRU SOMETHING THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN FLESH AND BONE!
THEN, HE TOO IS THRU A LOOMING DOOR--WHICH IS BOLTED BEHIND THEM.
CROM TAKE ME--
WHAT WAS THAT THING I FOUGHT?
IT WAS-- THE CRAWLER!

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THE CRAWLER!? WHAT THE DEVIL'S THAT?
A MONSTER-- WHICH THEY HAVE BROUGHT FROM THE CATACOMBS TO AID THEM!
WE'VE FOUND MEN HIDEOUSLY SLAIN BY IT, BUT NO MAN OF TECUHLTLI HAS SEEN IT.
THEN YOU MAY BE THE FIRST--
FOR, WHATEVER'S OUT THERE, IT'S STRAINING AT THE DOOR TO GET IN--
--AND, ANY SECOND NOW, IT MAY WELL HAVE ITS WISH!
EACH OF THEM MOVED NOW BY HIS OWN PRIVATE FEARS, THE TRIO TURN AND FLEE--
... EVEN AS THE WOODEN DOOR BUCKLES!
THIS IS TECUHLTLI!
IN SET'S NAME-- HASTEN!
WHY WORRY NOW? IF THIS IS THE PLACE OF YOUR PEOPLE--
MEN HAVE BEEN STRUCK DOWN BEFORE THIS DOOR-- WHEN THEY THOUGHT THEY WERE SAFE!
BID THEM HURRY THEN, MAN--
FOR, I HEAR SOMETHING-- SLITHERING ALONG THE FLOOR JUST BEYOND THE HALL!
OPEN, YOU FOOLS!
THE CRAWLER IS UPON US!
SLOWLY, THE GREAT BRONZE DOOR SWINGS NOISELESSLY OPEN...

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IT'S ABOUT TIME! DID YOU THINK THE CRAWLER WOULD WAIT FOREVER?
THE CRAWLER? AIEEE!
SHUT THE DOOR--! AND HE'LL TELL YOU ALL ABOUT IT!
NOW AT LAST WE ARE TRULY SAFE, MY FRIENDS.
EVEN THE CRAWLER CAN NEVER BREAK DOWN THE DOOR OF THE EAGLE.
NOW, COME...
AND I WILL TAKE YOU...
...TO THE RULERS OF TECUHLTLI.
IN THE NAME OF SET, FATHER OF SERPENTS--
--WHO DARES DISTURB THE SOLITUDE OF PRINCE OLMEC AND PRINCESS TASCELA?
Y-YOUR PARDON, MAJESTIES-- BUT I BRING ALLIES FROM THE WORLD BEYOND THE FOREST.
IN THE CHAMBER OF TEXCOTI I FOUND THEM, AFTER THE SLAYING OF MY COMPANION CHICMEC--
--WHERE THESE TWO SLEW MANY MEN OF XOTALANC--
--AYE, AND EVEN THE BURNING SKULL HIMSELF!!

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THE BURNING SKULL, YOU SAY--?
AYE, MY PRINCE... THOUGH HE TURNED OUT TO BE EVERY BIT AS MORTAL AS THE OTHER FOUR XOTALANCAS WE SLEW.
FIVE MEN! FIVE RED NAILS, THEN, FOR THE PILLAR OF VENGEANCE BEHIND US!
WELL THEN, I BID THESE STRANGERS WELCOME. I AM PRINCE OLMEC...
...AND THIS IS TASCELA, A PRINCESS OF TECUHLTLI.
...YES, PRINCE, WE'RE DESERTERS, MORE OR LESS.
THOUGH WE'VE BOTH BEEN PIRATES IN OUR DAY.
BUT, HOW CAME YOU THRU THE FOREST-- WHERE MANY DANGERS LIE?
OH, WE HAD VERY LITTLE TROUBLE...
...ONCE WE'D KILLED THAT DRAGON, ANYWAY.
YOU--YOU SLEW THE DRAGON-GOD?
I DON'T KNOW ABOUT ANY GOD. I SLEW A DRAGON.
WHY NOT? IT ATE OUR HORSES...AND TRIED TO EAT US.
THEN YOU ARE MIGHTY, INDEED. FOR IT WAS TO ESCAPE THE DRAGONS THAT OUR ANCESTORS FIRST CAME HERE.
THEY SHOULD HAVE DIPPED THEIR SPEARS IN THE JUICE OF POISON APPLES, AS WE DID.
BUT, YOUR ANCESTORS DIDN'T BUILD THIS CITY, THEN?
VALERIA SCARCELY HEARS CONAN'S WORDS...
...AWARE ONLY OF TASCELA'S EYES, BORING INTO HER...
...AS OLMEC BEGINS HIS TALE!
IT WAS MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY AGO...

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"...THAT A REBEL TRIBE ROSE AGAINST THE KING OF STYGIA. DEFEATED, THEY FLED SOUTHWARD TO THE GREAT FOREST YONDER.
"THERE THE DRAGONS FELL UPON THEM, SO THAT THEY FLED TO THE PLAIN WHICH LIES OUTSIDE THESE DOORS."

"THE CITY WAS INHABITED THEN; BUT ITS FOUNDERS SHUT THE GATE TO KEEP THE NEWCOMERS OUT.

"THAT NIGHT, A MAN NAMED TOLKEMEC CAME SECRETLY TO THEIR CAMP. HE HAD BEEN TAKEN SLAVE BY THE CITY'S PEOPLE, YEARS BEFORE.

"AND, AT DAWN, HE OPENED THE GATES FROM INSIDE! THE NEWCOMERS SWARMED INSIDE--AND THE HALLS OF XUCHOTL RAN RED!

"THE FOUNDERS OF THIS CITY WERE FEW IN NUMBER THEN.
"AND SO, LED BY TWO BROTHERS, TECUHLTLI AND XOTALANC--AND BY OLD TOLKEMEC--THEY WERE SPEEDILY SLAUGHTERED--

"FOR FIVE YEARS, WE DWELT HERE AS ONE TRIBE.
"THEN, XOTALANC TOOK A WOMAN TO WIFE, WHOM THE OTHER TWO DESIRED.
"IN HIS MADNESS, TOLKEMEC HELPED TECUHLTLI TO STEAL HER, LATER, FROM HER HUSBAND...

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"AND, WHEN XOTALANC'S MEN SOUGHT TO RECAPTURE HER, THE WARRIORS OF TECUHLTLI BATTLED THEM IN THE GREAT HALL.
"SOON, IT WAS WAR--BROTHER AGAINST BROTHER--
"...AS VENGEANCE FOLLOWED HARD ON THE HEELS OF VENGEANCE!
"TREACHEROUS TOLKEMEC'S MEN AIDED FIRST ONE SIDE, THEN THE OTHER--TILL ALL THREE RULING FACTIONS WERE AT EACH OTHER'S THROATS...
"BUT, ALL TOLKEMEC'S SCHEMING DID NOT SAVE HIM, THE NIGHT WE OF TECUHLTLI STORMED HIS QUARTER OF THE CITY.
"WE TORTURED TOLKEMEC FOR DAYS, TILL HE SCREAMED FOR DEATH AS FOR A BRIDE. THEN WE CAST HIM HALF-ALIVE INTO A DUNGEON...
"...FOR THE RATS TO GNAW!
"BOTH BROTHERS DIED SOON AFTER--XOTALANC SLAIN IN BATTLE--
"--AND TECUHTLI AS WELL--
"--FLAYED ALIVE BY THE MADDENED XOTALANCAS WHO CAPTURED HIM.
"MEANWHILE, TOLKEMEC ESCAPED FROM THE DUNGEON--THE GODS ONLY KNOW HOW!--DOUBTLESS TO PERISH IN THE CATACOMBS BENEATH THE CITY--THOUGH HIS BONES WERE NEVER FOUND, AND SOME SWEAR HIS GHOST STILL HAUNTS THE CRYPTS BELOW.
"BUT OUR FEUD GOES ON! WE BEAR NO CHILDREN. WE ARE A DYING RACE--BUT BEFORE WE DIE, WE WILL SLAY AS MANY MEN OF XOTALANC AS THE GODS PERMIT!"

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A PRETTY TALE, OLMEC. NOW, BY YOUR LEAVE...
NO! YOU DARE NOT LEAVE XUCHOTL!
YOU'D TRY TO STOP US--?
FORGIVE TASCELA'S OUTBURST, OUTLANDERS.
YES, PRINCESS, I THINK THEY DO DARE, DESPITE THE DRAGONS.
BUT, PERHAPS THEY'D BE INTERESTED IN OUR OFFER...
WHAT OFFER?
YOU ARE PROFESSIONAL FIGHTERS; WE HAVE WEALTH IN ABUNDANCE.
FIGHT FOR US--AND WE'LL GIVE YOU ALL THE JEWELS YOU CAN CARRY!
WELL?
WHAT DO YOU SAY, CONAN?
I SAY-- WE'VE BOTH SEEN RICHER TIMES THAN LATELY.
AND I'D AS SOON KILL XOTALANCAS AS ANYONE ELSE.
WE ACCEPT, OLMEC.
THIS WAY, FRIEND. YOU WON'T BE SORRY.
NOT IF YOU TECUHLTLI PAY YOUR DEBTS, WE WON'T.
LEAVING, VALERIA GLANCES BACK...
...TO SEE THE PRINCESS WHISPERING TO HER SULLEN-FACED MAID, YASALA.
WELL IT'S NONE OF HER AFFAIR.
...YOU'LL SLEEP IN HERE, WARRIOR-MAIDEN.
WAIT! WHAT ABOUT ME?
OVER HERE--ACROSS THE HALLWAY. KING OLMEC WAS QUITE CLEAR ABOUT THAT.
HE CAN AFFORD TO BE.
HE HAS THE PRINCESS TASCELA TO KEEP HIM WARM.

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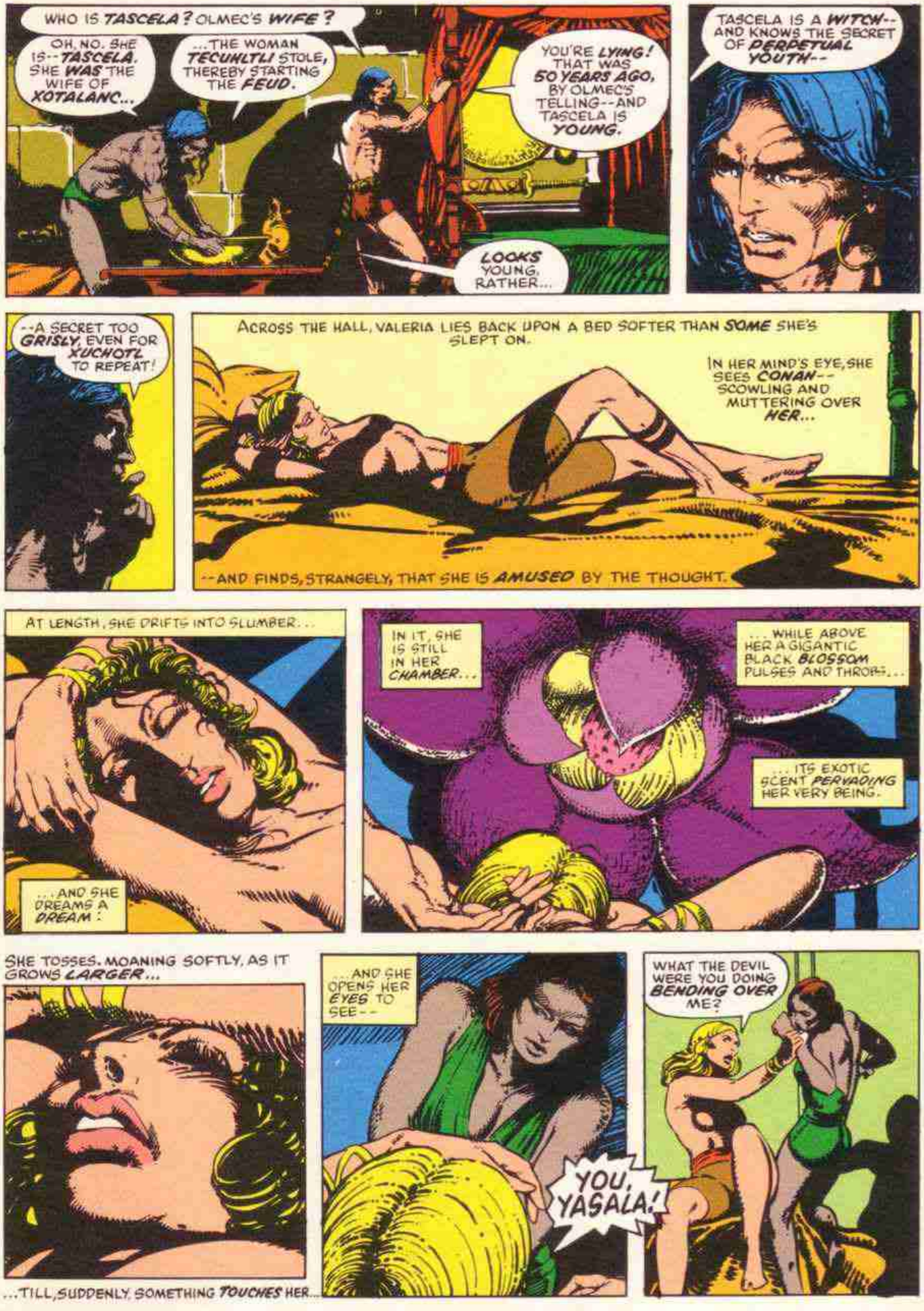
WHO IS TASCELA? OLMEC'S WIFE?
OH, NO. SHE IS--TASCELA. SHE WAS THE WIFE OF XOTALANC...
...THE WOMAN TECUHLTLI STOLE, THEREBY STARTING THE FEUD.
YOU'RE LYING! THAT WAS 50 YEARS AGO, BY OLMEC'S TELLING--AND TASCELA IS YOUNG.
LOOKS YOUNG, RATHER...
TASCELA IS A WITCH--AND KNOWS THE SECRET OF PERPETUAL YOUTH--
--A SECRET TOO GRISLY, EVEN FOR XUCHOTL TO REPEAT!
ACROSS THE HALL, VALERIA LIES BACK UPON A BED SOFTER THAN SOME SHE'S SLEPT ON.
IN HER MIND'S EYE, SHE SEES CONAN--SCOWLING AND MUTTERING OVER HER...
--AND FINDS, STRANGELY, THAT SHE IS AMUSED BY THE THOUGHT.
AT LENGTH, SHE DRIFTS INTO SLUMBER...
...AND SHE DREAMS A DREAM:
IN IT, SHE IS STILL IN HER CHAMBER...
...WHILE ABOVE HER A GIGANTIC BLACK BLOSSOM PULSES AND THROBS...
...ITS EXOTIC SCENT PERVADING HER VERY BEING.
SHE TOSSES. MOANING SOFTLY, AS IT GROWS LARGER...
...TILL, SUDDENLY, SOMETHING TOUCHES HER...
...AND SHE OPENS HER EYES TO SEE--
YOU, YASALA!
WHAT THE DEVIL WERE YOU DOING BENDING OVER ME?

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AND WHAT'S THAT IN YOUR HAND??
THE BLACK LOTUS!
HARLOT!
YOU TRIED TO DRUG ME--AND, IF YOU HADN'T ACCIDENTALLY TOUCHED MY FACE WITH THE PETALS--
WHO SENT YOU? TASCELA?
NO ANSWER, EH?
WELL, ONCE I'VE TIED YOU TO THIS COUCH...
...I'LL WAGER ONE THING, YASALA:
WHEN I'VE DONE APPLYING THE LASH TO YOUR FILTHY HIDE...
...YOU'LL BEG TO TELL ME WHAT TREACHERY YOU WERE UP TO!
RELENTLESSLY, THE BLOWS RAIN DOWN, DOWN... AND AGAIN DOWN... TILL A LOW WHIMPER ESCAPES THE CAPTIVE SERVANT'S LIPS...
M-MERCY, WOMAN...
...I... WILL TELL YOU... ALL...

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BUT... WINE FIRST. MUST HAVE WINE!
WEAK... WITH PAIN. NEED... SOMETHING TO DRINK...
HERE. DRINK FAST; THEN TALK FAST.
STILL, IT WAS AGAINST MY BETTER JUDGMENT TO...
MITRA!
BY ISHTAR--YOU'D BETTER RUN LIKE THE VERY DEVIL, GIRL!
FOR, ONCE I CATCH UP WITH YOU--
--YOU'LL NEVER DO ANY RUNNING AGAIN!
WHERE ARE YOU, HEY? THRU THAT DOOR THAT GAPES BLACKLY?
VALERIA'S LEGS, POWERED BY ANGER, NEARLY CARRY HER THRU THE LOOMING DOORWAY...
THEN, SHE IS HALTED BY SOME FORGOTTEN INSTINCT...
AND SHE KNOWS:
IT IS THE DOOR THAT LEADS TO THE CATACOMBS BELOW, ISN'T IT?
YOU'VE TAKEN REFUGE AMONG THE DEAD, HAVEN'T YOU, YASALA?
WELL...
... THEY CAN HAVE YOU.

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THE SHE-PIRATE IS SHIVERING SLIGHTLY WHEN SHE REACHES HER OWN DOOR . . .
. . . HER THOUGHTS ALL OF CORPSES MOULDERING IN DANK CRYPTS.
SHE'S NO INTENTION OF GROPING HER WAY DOWN THERE IN THE DARK.
AND THEN--
HELP! IN THE NAME OF SET-- AAAAAHH!
A WOMAN'S VOICE! YASALA!?
THE SOUND TRAILS AWAY . . . SAVE PERHAPS FOR THE ECHO OF GHOSTLY TITTERING.
IT IS ANOTHER SHOUT, MOMENTS LATER-- THE YELLING OF MEN, AND THE CLANGOR OF STEEL-- THAT BRINGS CONAN BOUNDING FROM HIS COUCH--
-- WIDE AWAKE SWORD IN HAND!
WHAT'S ALL THIS YOWLING ABOUT, TECHOTL?
THE XOTALANCAS! THEY ARE WITHIN THE DOOR!
BUT NOW THE DEVIL--?
THE HOW DOESN'T MATTER, WOMAN.
WE WERE HIRED THIS EVENING TO FIGHT, REMEMBER?
WELL, IT'S TIME WE STARTED EARNING OUR KEEP!
MY COUSIN XATMEC--DEAD! BUT, HE STOOD GUARD AT THE GATE OF THE EAGLE.
HE WOULDN'T HAVE LET THE XOTALANCAS IN! HE WOULDN'T!!
CONAN AND VALERIA SCARCELY HEAR TORTURED WORDS--

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--AS THEY BURST UPON A SCENE BEYOND THEIR MADDEST DREAMS OF BLOOD AND FURY!
IT'S THE XOTALANCAS, ALL RIGHT--LOOKS TO BE ABOUT TWENTY OF THEM! YOU CAN TELL THEM BY THE WHITE SKULLS ON THEIR CHESTS.
THEY'RE OUT-NUMBERED, HERE ON THE TECUHLTLIS' HOME GROUND...
BUT THEY HAVE THE ADVANTAGE OF SURPRISE!
WELL, LET'S SEE IF WE CAN'T SEND THEM BACK TO THE EASTERN GATE --OR, BETTER STILL, TO THEIR GODS!
STILL, I WONDER WHY THEY RISKED ALL IN ONE ATTACK LIKE THIS!
IT ALL SEEMS MAD!
CONAN AND VALERIA ARE NOT DESTINED TO KNOW THE WHY...
BUT THE MAIMING OF THEIR SCALY ALLY, THE CRAWLER... THE DEATH OF THE BURNING SKULL...
...AND NOW THE NEWS THAT THE TECUHLTLI HAVE MYSTERIOUS, LIGHT-SKINNED ALLIES...
ALL THESE HAVE DRIVEN THE XOTALANCAS TO A FRENZY OF WILD DESPERATION DEALING DEATH

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EVEN TASCELA RUNS IN FROM A FAR CHAMBER, SWORD IN HAND. THIS IS THE BLOODY CLIMAX OF A BLOODY HALF-CENTURY...
...AND NOT A MAN HERE BUT SENSES IT.

AS FOR CONAN: NO THREE FOES ARE A MATCH FOR HIM, AS HE MOVES THRU THE SWIRLING MASS WITH THE DEADLY SURENESS OF A PANTHER AMID A PACK OF ALLEY CURS...

EVEN TECHOTL, ARRIVING LATE ON THE SCENE, ENTERS INTO THE GRIM MOOD OF THE BATTLE...
...SLASHING THE THROATS OF THE WOUNDED, AND CURSING BECAUSE HE IS TOO LATE TO SHARE MORE IN THE BLOOD-LETTING.

NEXT TIME, TECHOTL, YOU'LL NOT PAUSE TO WAIL OVER COUSINS WHO CAN NO LONGER HEAR YOU.
THE LAST OF THE XOTALANCAS IS DEAD, SO YOU CAN'T--
CONAN! LOOK OUT BEHIND--!

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HUHN? MAKE A LIAR OUT OF ME, WILL YOU, DOG?
BUT BEWARE, WOMAN-- HE HAS A FRIEND!
MITRA! IT'S SHEER HATE THAT'S KEPT THESE XOTALANCAS ALIVE SO LONG...
...AND I'M BETTING THEY'LL STILL FEED ON THAT HATRED AT THE BANQUET-TABLES OF HELL!
LIKE SURVIVORS AFTER JUDGEMENT DAY, CONAN AND VALERIA STARE BLEAKLY AND BLANKLY AT EACH OTHER ACROSS THE GREAT THRONE ROOM...
... AND NEITHER OF THEM HAS BREATH ENOUGH LEFT TO SHOUT.
YET, THE NEXT INSTANT, A BESTIAL MAD HOWLING ARISES FROM THE LIPS OF THE FEW REMAINING TECUHLTLIS.
IT IS NOT A HUMAN CRY OF TRIUMPH, BUT THE HOWLING OF A WOLF-PACK STALKING AMONG THE BODIES OF ITS VICTIMS.
IT SENDS A SHUDDER THRU THE FRAMES OF SHE-PIRATE AND CIMMERIAN ALIKE...
AND MAKES THEM FEEL SUDDENLY, STRANGELY APART FROM THESE PEOPLE WHO ARE THEIR EMPLOYERS.

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VALERIA -- YOU'VE A STAB -- IN THE CALF OF YOUR LEG. SEE TO IT.
IT'S NOTHING. YOU LOOK -- LIKE A BUTCHER -- YOURSELF.
A SCRATCH HERE AND THERE, THAT'S ALL.
HERE COMES OLMEC.
WE HAVE WON! THE FEUD IS ENDED -- FOREVER!
IT IS GOOD TO LOOK UPON THEIR DEAD XOTALANC FACES -- BUT OH, FOR A CAPTIVE TO FLAY ALIVE!
TWENTY DEAD DOGS --
-- TWENTY RED NAILS FOR THE BLACK COLUMN!
THOUGH YOU'VE SCARCELY TWENTY MEN TO COUNT THEM.
BUT, HOW DO YOU KNOW THIS IS ALL THE XOTALANCAS?
THEY'D NOT HAVE SPLIT THE CLAN ON A FORAY LIKE THIS. I KNOW THEM -- RATHER, I KNEW THEM.
STILL...
YES! YOU'LL GO TO XOTALANC ITSELF, TO SEE IF ANY REMAIN ALIVE.
YANATH AND TOPAL HERE WILL GO WITH YOU.
GOOD ENOUGH...
...SINCE VALERIA'S LEG WILL BE GETTING STIFF SOON.
AS OLMEC AND TOPAL LIFT A SORELY WOUNDED MAN, CONAN THINKS THE PRINCE MUTTERS SOMETHING TO THE WARRIOR...
BUT, HE CAN'T BE SURE...
...SO HE DECIDES IT IS TIME TO BE OFF.
I KEEP WONDERING HOW THE XOTALANCAS GOT INTO TECUHLTLI...
PERHAPS... THOSE PIPES THERE HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH IT!?

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THE PIPES OF MADNESS--OF WHICH TOLKEMEC USED TO SPEAK!
HE SAID THEY WERE WIZARD-MADE--AND THAT THOSE WHO HEARD THEM WOULD YIELD TO THE PIPER'S WILL.
WELL, NO ONE WILL EVER HEAR THEM AGAIN.
NOW, LET'S GO.
--AFTER I'VE WASHED!
BEHIND THEM, A TECUHLTLI WOMAN HAS JUST FINISHED BINDING VALERIA'S WOUND WHEN OLMEC ENTERS THE ROOM.
IN AN INSTANT VALERIA SENSES WHY HE HAS COME
BUT SHE IS TOO SLOW IN REACHING FOR HER SWORD AS OLMEC IS SWIFTER THAN HE LOOKS.
CATCHING HER IN HIS GIANT ARMS, HE SQUEEZES THE BREATH FROM HER--SO THAT STARS FLASH WILDLY BEFORE HER EYES--
STARS--THEN BLACKNESS.
THE NEXT MOMENT, OLMEC IS STRIDING FROM THE CHAMBER CARRYING THE UNCONSCIOUS WOMAN IN HIS ARMS.
IT IS TECHOL'S ILL FORTUNE TO COME LIMPING ONTO THE STARTLING SCENE...
IT IS HIS WORSE TO PROTEST SUCH TREATMENT OF ONE WHO HAS BEEN A VALUED ALLY...

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WITHOUT A WORD, OLMEC BALLS HIS FREE HAND INTO A HUGE FIST--
--AND STRETCHES THE WOUNDED WARRIOR SENSELESS AT HIS FEET.
THEN STOOPING, HE DRAWS TECHOTL'S OWN DAGGER-- AND STABS HIM IN THE BACK WITH IT.
--BEFORE FLEEING ALONG THE CORRIDOR.
AIIEEE! NO MAN HAS COME SO CLOSE IN FIFTY YEARS TO THE DOORS OF XOTALANC...
...UNLESS HE WAS A PRISONER, GOING TO A DARK AND HIDEOUS DOOM!
WELL, WE'RE THIS CLOSE.
IN FACT, WE'RE THERE...
...ONCE WE PASS THRU THAT OPEN DOOR.
NO! W-WE MUSTN'T! THERE IS OLD MAGIC THERE!
THE SAME KIND OF MAGIC THAT LET THEM BE SLAUGHTERED BY YOU TECUHLTLIS?
WELL, IF YOU TWO WON'T COME WITH ME...
...THEN STEP ASIDE!
YOU SEE? THERE'S NOTHING AND NO ONE HERE...
...OR ELSE YOUR MOANING WOULD HAVE BROUGHT THEM RACING FORTH.
IT WOULD BE NICE, THOUGH, IF THERE WERE SOMEONE HERE TO LEAD US TO THEIR KING'S TREASURY...
CONAN WALKS ON. HE'S NOT GONE FAR, HOWEVER...
...WHEN HE IS AWARE THAT ONLY YANATH IS FOLLOWING HIM.

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TOPAL--?
LET'S SEE WHAT YOU'RE GAWKING AT, BEHIND THESE--
WHAT THE DEVIL--?
GODS OF OUR FATHERS--
--IT IS THE CRAWLER-- DEAD!
WHEN I SLASHED IT, IT MUST HAVE DRAGGED ITSELF HERE TO DIE.
WELL, LET'S MOVE ON.
AYE. BUT IF THE XOTALANCAS CALLED ANY MORE SUCH UP FROM THE CATACOMBS--
IF THEY HAD, THEY'D HAVE BROUGHT THEM ALONG WHEN THEY ATTACKED TECUHLTLI.
NOW, WE'LL SEE IF ANYONE'S IN HERE--!
THEIR THRONE CHAMBER! BUT LOOK--ALONG THE WALL--!
CROM!
ON DUSTY ROWS OF GLASS-COVERED SHELVES, COUNTLESS HUMAN HEADS PERFECTLY PRESERVED, STARE AT THE STARTLED INTRUDERS WITH EMOTIONLESS EYES--
-- JUST AS THEY HAVE STARED, FOR ONLY THE GODS KNOW HOW MANY MONTHS AND YEARS.

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MY-- MY BROTHER--!
WHAT?
MY BROTHER!!
YOU CAN'T HAVE IT--
--EITHER OF YOU!
CONAN KNOWS THAT TECUHLTLI SANITY IS HUNG ON A HAIR-TRIGGER.
HE KNOWS ALSO, IN THIS MOMENT, THAT YANATH HAS GONE STARK MAD!
AND EVEN AS HE PARRIES THE BERSERKER'S BLOW--
-- THAT SWORD PLUNGES DEEP INTO TOPAL'S BODY.
THEN, A WILD LIGHT STILL FLASHING FROM HIS EYES, YANATH TURNS--GLARING LIKE A RABID ANIMAL.
BUT, EVEN IN HIS RAGE, THE MADMAN'S THRUST IS NOT QUICK ENOUGH FOR--
--CONAN OF CIMMERIA!
YOU ARE A DEAD MAN, TOPAL. IS THERE ANY WORD YOU WISH TO SEND TO YOUR PEOPLE?
B-BEND CLOSER..!
YES?

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MOTHER OF MITRA! ARE YOU MAD, TOO?
IT WAS OLMEC -- HE ORDERED YOUR DEATH--
--I KNOW-- NOT--WHYyyy...
OLMEC? IS EVERYONE IN THIS ACCURSED CITY INSANE?
NO ANSWER...
THUS, CONAN LEAVES THE TWO DEAD TECUHLTLI LYING THERE, BENEATH THE STARING EYE OF THEIR KINGSMEN'S SEVERED HEADS.
...FORGET THAT BARBARIAN, WOMAN! OLMEC IS LORD OF XUCHOTL!
WE'LL SPEND OUR LIVES IN DRINKING AND LOVEMAKING. WE--
YOUR GUEST DOES NOT LIKE YOUR WINE, OLMEC.
YOU!
YES, I-- TASCELA.
YOU'VE KEPT OUR HANDSOME GUEST TO YOURSELF, EVEN THOUGH YOU KNEW I WISHED TO... ENTERTAIN HER.
SHE IS MINE, WITCH!
YOU ARE A SELFISH ONE, OLMEC...
GET OUT-- BEFORE I SLAY YOU!
POOR OLMEC... YOU KNOW YOU CANNOT WITHSTAND ME.
I'VE BUT TO GAZE INTO YOUR EYES, AS A PRIEST IN STYGIA ONCE TAUGHT ME--AND YOU ARE POWERLESS.
IS IT NOT SO?
YES...I...
THEN DOWN, DOG... DOWN ON YOUR KNEES!
TAKE THIS CUP...
...AND DRINK DEEP.

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HE'S-- FALLEN. WHAT--?
MERELY PARALYZED. BUT, HE CAN STILL FEEL--
--AND I'VE PLANS FOR HIM.
DO WHAT YOU WANT WITH HIM! I'M GETTING OUT OF THIS MADHOUSE!
VALERIA BOLTS FOR THE DOOR-- BUT, WITH A MOVEMENT LIKE A PANTHER'S...
...TASCELA IS THERE BEFORE HER!
OUT OF MY WAY, WITCH--
--OR I'LL--
THE BLOW VALERIA STRIKES IS THE SAME THAT FELLED A KHITAN WRESTLER ONCE, IN THE SUKHMET BARRACKS. IT KNOCKED HIM SENSELESS, AND BROKE HIS JAW.
BUT TASCELA IS MERELY IMPRESSED.
ISHTAR! YOU'RE STRONG--
--STRONGER THAN MOST MEN I'VE KNOWN!
BUT WHAT-?
WHAT DO I WANT WITH YOU?
I'VE CHOSEN YOU FOR A GREAT HONOR, VALERIA.
I LOOK YOUNG TO YOU, I KNOW...
BUT I AM OLD--SO OLD I DO NOT REMEMBER MY CHILDHOOD.
STILL, A STYGIAN PRIEST ONCE GAVE ME THE SECRET OF LIFE ETERNAL.
SOON AFTER, HE DIED--SOME SAID OF POISON.
OLMEC CALLED ME A PRINCESS... BUT I AM FAR GREATER THAN ANY PRINCESS.
I AM TASCELA...
--WHOSE FADING YOUTH YOUR OWN GLORIOUS YOUTH SHALL SOON RESTORE!

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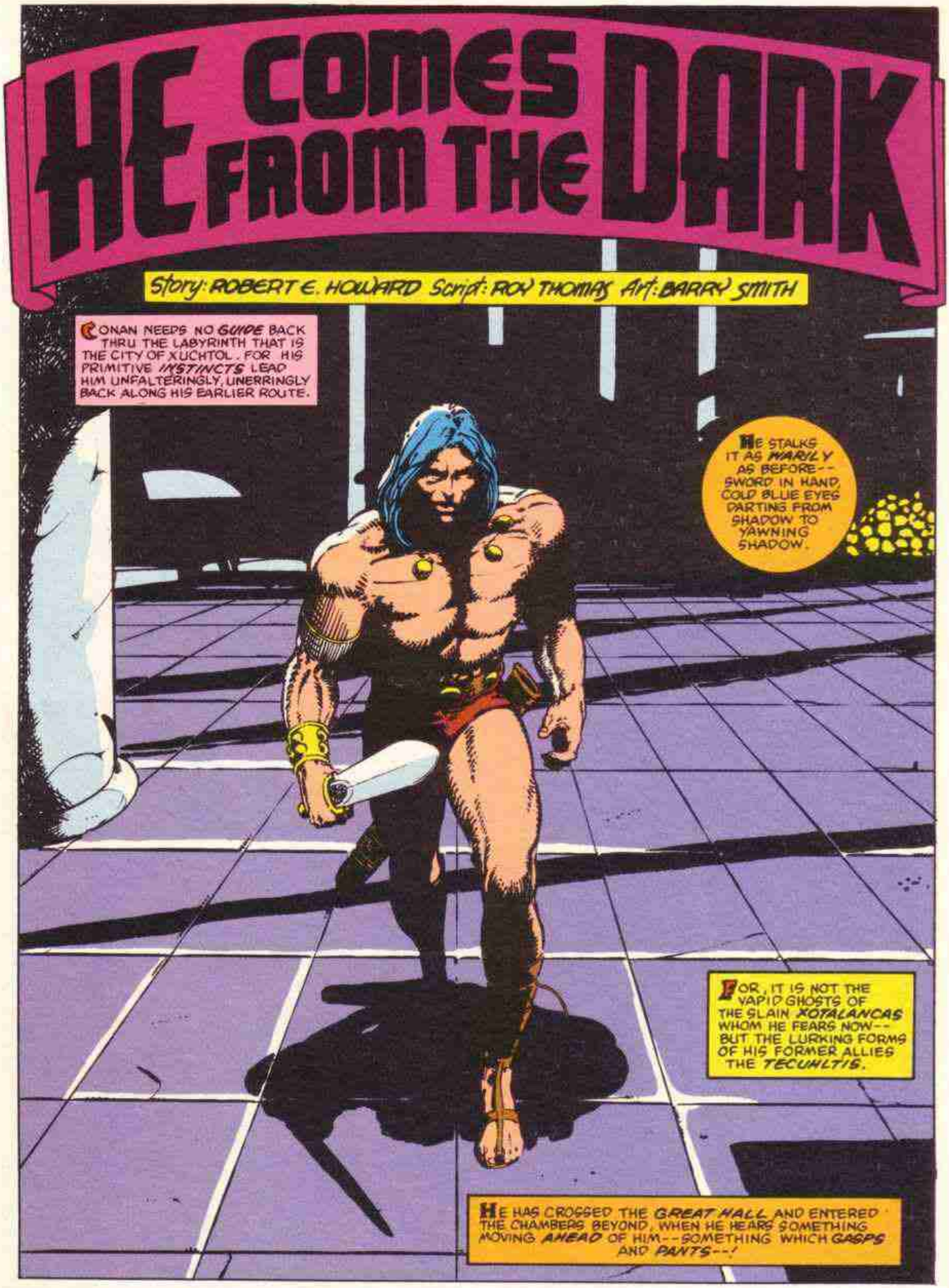
HE COMES FROM THE DARK
Story: ROBERT E. HOWARD Script: ROY THOMAS Art: BARRY SMITH
CONAN NEEDS NO GUIDE BACK THRU THE LABYRINTH THAT IS THE CITY OF XUCHTOL. FOR HIS PRIMITIVE INSTINCTS LEAD HIM UNFALTERINGLY, UNERRINGLY BACK ALONG HIS EARLIER ROUTE.
HE STALKS IT AS WARILY AS BEFORE--SWORD IN HAND, COLD BLUE EYES DARTING FROM SHADOW TO YAWNING SHADOW.
FOR, IT IS NOT THE VAPID GHOSTS OF THE SLAIN XOTALANCAS WHOM HE FEARS NOW--BUT THE LURKING FORMS OF HIS FORMER ALLIES THE TECUHLTIS.
HE HAS CROSSED THE GREAT HALL AND ENTERED THE CHAMBERS BEYOND, WHEN HE HEARS SOMETHING MOVING AHEAD OF HIM--SOMETHING WHICH GASPS AND PANTS--!

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IT IS A MAN CONAN SEES MERE MOMENTS LATER...
...A CRAWLING MAN, WHOSE PROGRESS HAS LEFT A BROAD BLOODY SMEAR ON COLD STONES.
TECHOTL!?
CONAN! OLMEC HAS TAKEN-- THE YELLOW-HAIRED WOMAN!
SO THAT'S WHY HE ORDERED ME STRUCK DOWN!
I-- OPPOSED HIM. HE THOUGHT-- HE'D SLAIN ME--
BUT I HAVE CRAWLED FAR-- SO FAR-- IN MY OWN BLOOD!
FIND THE WOMAN-- AND FLEE! OLMEC LIED-- THERE ARE NO MORE DRAGONS-- BUT THE ONE YOU SLEW!
HE HAS TAKEN HER-- TO THE CH-CHAMBER OF THE--

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IT IS A STIFLED HUMAN CRY THAT LEADS HIM NEXT, THRU A THICK STONE DOORWAY. TO --
WELL, I'M A KUSHITE! OLMEC!!
BOUND AND GAGGED ON A TORTURE RACK!
AN INGENIOUS DEVICE.
EACH TIME YOU MOVE, THAT IRON BALL SINKS LOWER...
...TILL AT LENGTH IT WILL CRUSH YOU TO A PULP.
MMFFF
INTERESTING.
NOW TELL ME-- WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
BE CAREFUL WITH THAT THING, FOR SET'S SAKE!
WHAT FOR? I ONLY WISH I HAD TIME--
--TO WATCH THAT CHUNK OF IRON FLATTEN YOUR SKULL.
BUT, I'M IN A HURRY. WHERE'S VALERIA??
IT WAS TASCELA! SHE MUST RENEW HER LIFE AND YOUTH-- BY THE SACRIFICE OF BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMEN.
THE DOORS OF TECUHLTLI ARE LOCKED NOW-- BUT I KNOW A WAY TO GET IN--!
THEN LEAD THE WAY-- AND NO TRICKS--
--OR YOU'LL WISH FOR THAT IRON BALL OVER YOUR HEAD AGAIN!
MOVE!

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TECUHLTLI HIMSELF BUILT THIS SECRET ENTRANCE --BUT TASCELA LEARNED OF IT ONE DAY, AFTER HER PASSION HAD TURNED TO HATE.
SHE LOCKED HIM OUT OF IT-- SO THAT THE XOTALANCAS CAPTURED HIM--AND FLAYED HIM ALIVE!
NOW ONLY TASCELA KNOWS IT-- AND I, WHO SPIED ON HER.
TELL ME, OLMEC! IF TASCELA IS ALL BUT IMMORTAL, HOW CAN YOU HOPE TO OVERCOME HER?
TRUE, SHE CAN WORK MAGIC, GIVEN TIME--
--BUT, A KNIFE IN THE BACK WON'T GIVE HER THE CHANCE.
ONE OF US WOULD HAVE SLAIN THE OTHER, YEARS AGO...
...BUT EACH NEEDED THE OTHER, UNTIL NOW...
--WHEN THE XOTALANCAS ALL ARE DEAD, EH?
AAIIEEE
A WOMAN'S VOICE!
VALERIA!
GO JOIN HER THEN-- IN DEATH!!
CONAN'S WOLFISH INSTINCTS CAUSE HIM TO WHEEL--
--JUST IN TIME TO AVOID THE BRUNT OF OLMEC'S BLOW--
--AND TO GRASP HIS HAMMER-LIKE ARM, SO THAT HEADLONG THEY TUMBLE DOWN THE STEPS TOGETHER--
--INTO THE DARK UNKNOWN THAT GAPES BEYOND.

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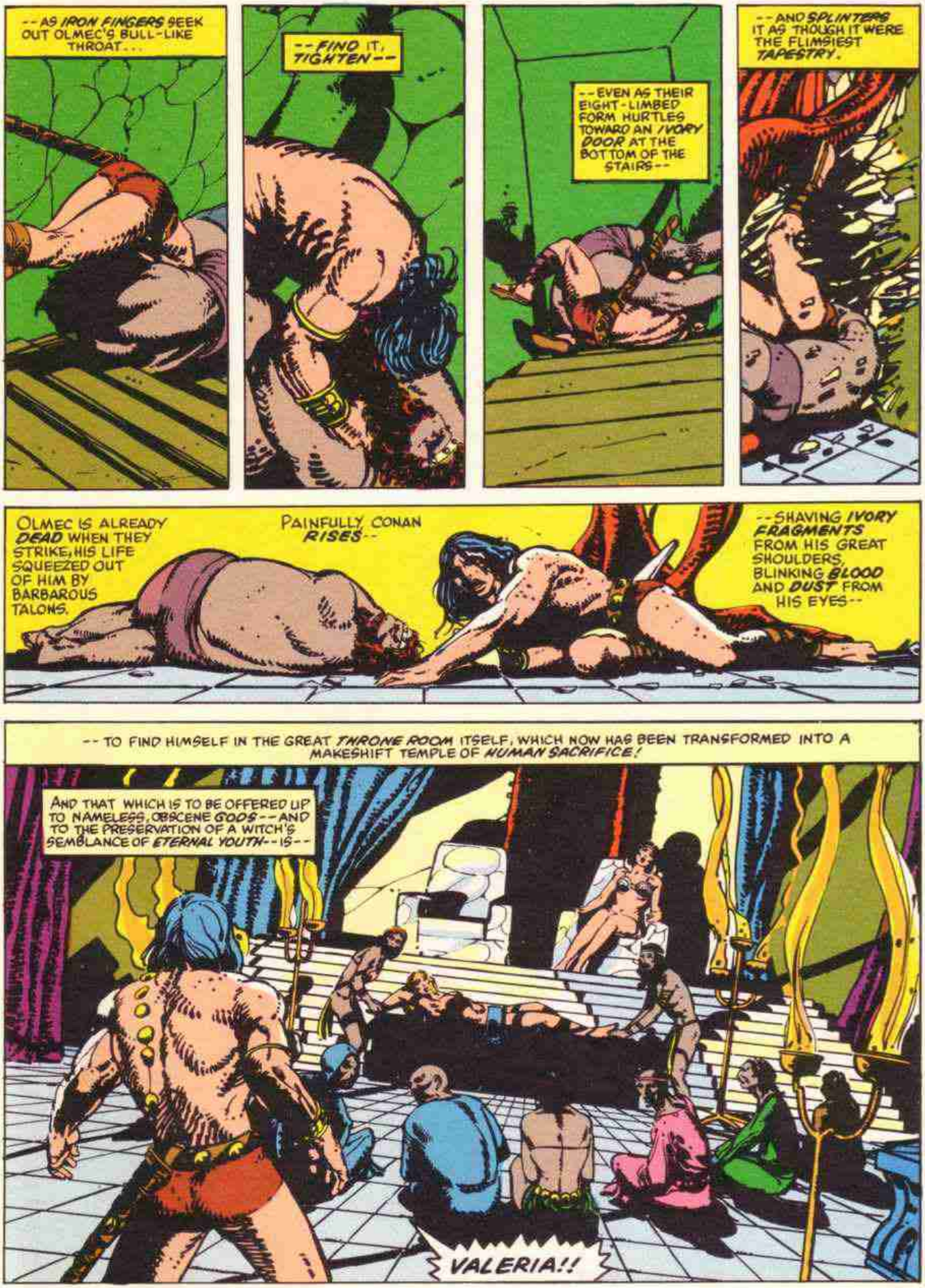
--AS IRON FINGERS SEEK OUT OLMEC'S BULL-LIKE THROAT...
--FIND IT, TIGHTEN--
--EVEN AS THEIR EIGHT-LIMBED FORM HURTLES TOWARD AN IVORY DOOR AT THE BOTTOM OF THE STAIRS--
--AND SPLINTERS IT AS THOUGH IT WERE THE FLIMSIEST TAPESTRY.
OLMEC IS ALREADY DEAD WHEN THEY STRIKE, HIS LIFE SQUEEZED OUT OF HIM BY BARBAROUS TALONS.
PAINFULLY CONAN RISES--
--SHAVING IVORY FRAGMENTS FROM HIS GREAT SHOULDERS, BLINKING BLOOD AND DUST FROM HIS EYES--
--TO FIND HIMSELF IN THE GREAT THRONE ROOM ITSELF, WHICH NOW HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED INTO A MAKESHIFT TEMPLE OF HUMAN SACRIFICE!
AND THAT WHICH IS TO BE OFFERED UP TO NAMELESS, OBSCENE GODS--AND TO THE PRESERVATION OF A WITCH'S SEMBLANCE OF ETERNAL YOUTH--IS--
VALERIA!!

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THE KNEELING ONES--SOLE SURVIVORS OF THE TECUHTLI CLAN--GLANCE INCURIOUSLY AT THEIR PRINCE'S CORPSE AND AT CONAN.
BUT VALERIA'S EYES PLEAD SILENTLY--AND TARCELA'S VOICE IS A MOCKING, MIRTHLESS LAUGH--
...WHICH FIRES THE BLOOD IN BARBARIAN VEINS!
SLUT!
ENRAGED, HE FAILS TO SEE THE CAMOUFLAGED SLOTS IN THE FLOOR.
--TILL THE FANGED JAW OF AN IRON TRAP CLOSE SWIFTLY, PAINFULLY--!
ARRR
FOOL!
DID YOU THINK TO TAKE ME UNAWARES?
GROVEL NOW AND WATCH--WRITHING IN PAIN THAT WOULD DRIVE MAD A LESSER MAN--
--WHILE I FULFILL THE DESTINY OF YOUR LOVELY FRIEND!
WE TECUHLTLIS ARE FEW NOW--FOR, THREE MORE OF US HAVE VANISHED WHILE TAKING THOSE SLAIN IN THE RAID TO THE CRYPTS.
THESE FOOLS SAY THE GHOST OF TOLKEMEC TOOK THEM--BUT THE GHOST IS A MYTH!
THIS IS REAL, AND THIS ALONE:
THIS YOUNG BODY--ITS PULSING BLOOD--
--THIS BLADE--

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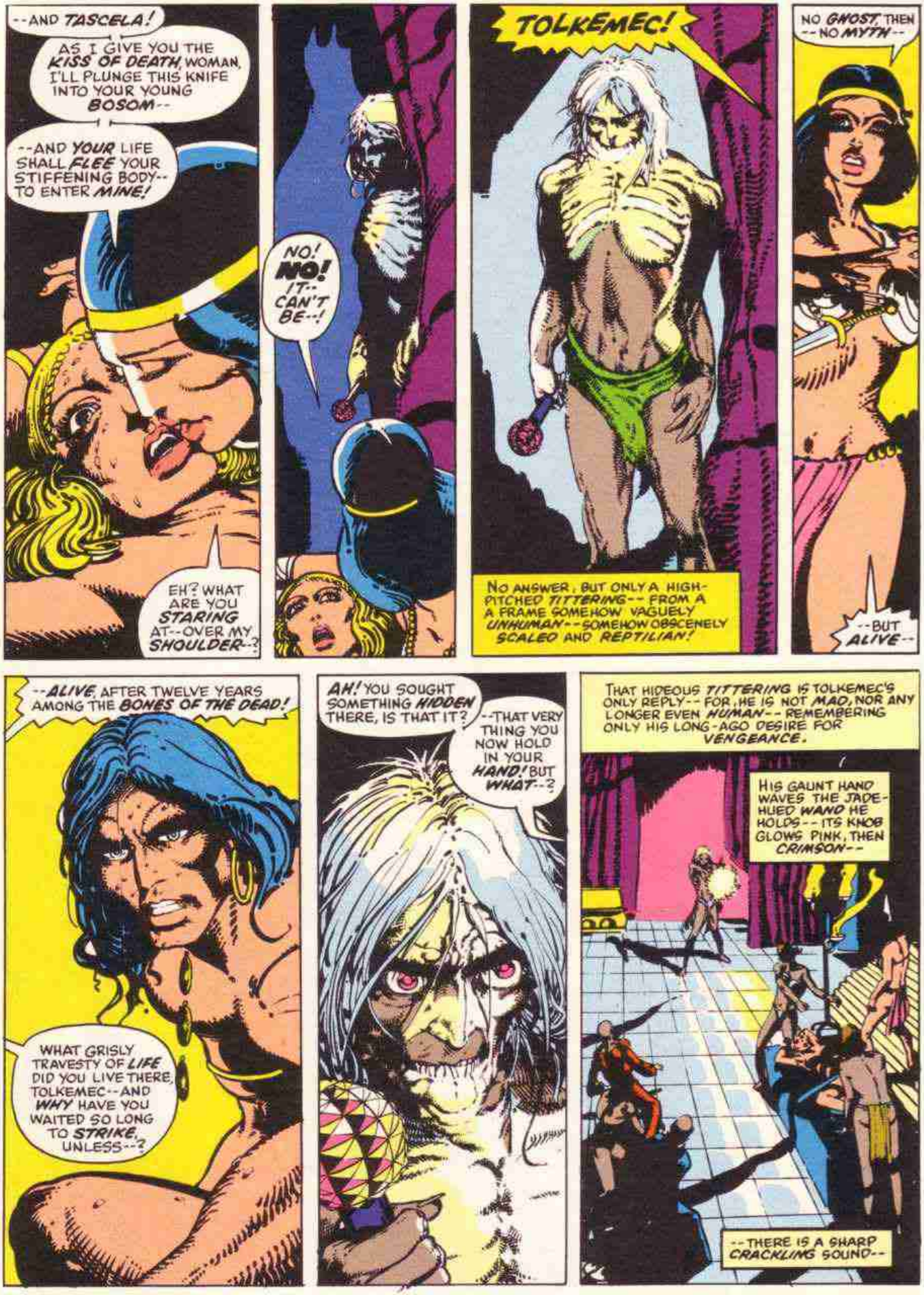
--AND TASCELA!
AS I GIVE YOU THE KISS OF DEATH, WOMAN, I'LL PLUNGE THIS KNIFE INTO YOUR YOUNG BOSOM--
--AND YOUR LIFE SHALL FLEE YOUR STIFFENING BODY-- TO ENTER MINE!
EH? WHAT ARE YOU STARING AT--OVER MY SHOULDER--?
NO! NO! IT-- CAN'T BE--!
TOLKEMEC!
NO ANSWER, BUT ONLY A HIGH-PITCHED TITTERING-- FROM A A FRAME SOMEHOW VAGUELY UNHUMAN--SOMEHOW OBSCENELY SCALED AND REPTILIAN!
NO GHOST, THEN --NO MYTH--
--BUT ALIVE--
--ALIVE, AFTER TWELVE YEARS AMONG THE BONES OF THE DEAD!
WHAT GRISLY TRAVESTY OF LIFE DID YOU LIVE THERE, TOLKEMEC--AND WHY HAVE YOU WAITED SO LONG TO STRIKE, UNLESS--?
AH! YOU SOUGHT SOMETHING HIDDEN THERE, IS THAT IT?
--THAT VERY THING YOU NOW HOLD IN YOUR HAND! BUT WHAT--?
THAT HIDEOUS TITTERING IS TOLKEMEC'S ONLY REPLY-- FOR, HE IS NOT MAD, NOR ANY LONGER EVEN HUMAN-- REMEMBERING ONLY HIS LONG-AGO DESIRE FOR VENGEANCE.
HIS GAUNT HAND WAVES THE JADE-HUED WAND HE HOLDS-- ITS KNOB GLOWS PINK, THEN CRIMSON--
--THERE IS A SHARP CRACKLING SOUND--

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--AND A RAY OF FIRE FLASHES THRU THE WOMAN NEAREST TASCELA--
--TO STRIKE THE BLACK METAL ALTAR BEYOND!
NOW, AS THE WOMAN'S FORM FALLS BLAZING TO THE FLOOR--
--AS VALERIA, UNNOTICED, THRUSTS ASIDE THE CLAMPS THAT HELD HER DOWN--
--AND AS FEAR-MAD TECUHLTLIS RUN SCREAMING AWAY--
--HELL BURSTS ITS BONDS THERE IN THE THRONE ROOM OF DEAD OLMEC--
--AND SLAUGHTER BEGINS!
MITRA!
CONAN NOTES, EVEN AMID PANDEMONIUM, THAT EACH FIRE-BURST ENDS BY STRIKING EITHER THE ALTAR, OR A METAL DOORWAY--
--AS IF THE WAND'S POWERS NEED METAL TO FIRE AGAINST.
MEANWHILE, TOLKEMEC DEALS DEATH WITH HIS WITCH-WAND, CHOOSING NO SPECIAL VICTIM, NOT EVEN TASCELA--
--BUT TAKING THEM AS THEY COME, AND SLAYING ALL--
--THE GUTSY ECHOES OF HIS INSANE TITTERING SWEEPING THE ROOM EVEN ABOVE THE SCREAMS OF DAMNED MEN, DAMNED WOMEN--
--TILL ONLY TASCELA IS LEFT ALIVE, OF ALL THE TECUHLTLIS--
--TASCELA, WHO RACES TOWARD THE ENSNARED BARBARIAN--
--EVEN AS TOLKEMEC DANCES MADLY ABOUT THE FIRE-SHOT CHAMBER!

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COME CLOSER, WITCH! MAKE ONE THRUST AT ME WITH THAT DAGGER, AND--
IF I FREE YOU--WILL YOU SLAY HIM IF YOU CAN?
WHAT DO YOU THINK?
FREE ME--AND GIVE ME YOUR KNIFE! WHAT OTHER CHANCE DO YOU HAVE, WOMAN?
WHAT OTHER CHANCE?!
SLAY HIM, THEN--
FOR I'VE NO MAGIC THAT CAN WITHSTAND HIM!
THAT'S MORE LIKE IT!
CROM! MY LEG ACHES-- AS IF THE FOREST-DRAGON'S TEETH HAD BEEN SUNK IN IT!
BUT, AS SOON AS I RID MYSELF OF THESE SMOKING CORPSES--
--I'LL SEE IF I CAN DO YOUR KILLING FOR YOU!
TOLKEMEC!
THE SCALY-FLESHED MADMAN TURNS-- INHUMAN SMILE LIGHTS HIS DARK, REPTILIAN FEATURES--
--AND FIRE LEAPS ONCE MORE FROM HIS WAND--
--TO RAISE DANCING BLUE SPARKS ON STRIKING A METAL STAND DIRECTLY BEHIND THE CIMMERIAN.
HE'LL NOT GET BETWEEN TOLKEMEC AND METAL AGAIN CONAN VOWS.*
THEN BEGINS THE DEADLIEST STALKING EVER SEEN--AMID THE SMOULDERING REMAINS OF DEAD MEN, AND THE SHRILL CRY OF TASCELA--
SLAY HIM, YOU FOOL!
SLAY HIM!

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NO PRANCING AND CAPERING IN TOLKEMEC NOW: NO SOUND AT ALL IN THE CHAMBER...
...SAVE THE RUSTLE AND SCRAPE OF QUICK-SHIFTING FEET.
IT IS GRIMMER GAME THAT CONFRONTS TOLKEMEC NOW, THAN THOSE WHO DIED SCREAMING AND FLEEING.
AND THE WOMEN?
THEY WATCH TENSELY... SILENTLY...
...HOLDING THEIR BREATH.
FOR, WHEN TOLKEMEC MOVES--
--CONAN MOVES--
--AS IF INVISIBLE THREADS BOUND TOGETHER THEIR EYES, THEIR LIMBS--THEIR VERY LIVES!
YET, ALL THE WHILE, CONAN IS DRAWING CLOSER TO HIS WILD-EYED PREY...
...EVER CLOSER.
...TILL HIS BRONZED THIGHS ARE FLEXING FOR A PANTHERISH SPRING...
...EVEN AS VALERIA CRIES OUT:
CONAN! THE DOOR!!
YOU'RE IN LINE WITH A--

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IN THAT INSTANT, THE MURDEROUS RED LINE LEAPS LIKE A LIVING THING FROM TOLKEMEC'S WAND--
BUT IT MERELY SEARS CONAN'S FLANK AND TWISTS ASIDE TO LAND ON HIS FEET--
--AND HURL THE KNIFE--
--WHICH FINDS ITS MARK AT LAST!
THE LIFE HAS ONLY JUST FLED FROM TOLKEMEC'S STILL-TWITCHING CORPSE, WHEN TASCELA SPRINGS FORWARD--
--NOT TOWARD CONAN, NOR TOWARD HER FALLEN FOE--
--BUT TOWARD-- THE WAND!
I'M MORE AGILE EVEN THAN TOLKEMEC, FOOL--
AND, WITH THAT WOUND IN YOUR SIDE, YOU'LL NOT--
NOT WHAT, WOMAN?

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NOT WHAT I?
I HAD TO DO THAT MUCH--
--FOR MY OWN SELF-RESPECT!
WELL, THAT CLEANS UP THE FEUD.
AND I'M HUNGRY ENOUGH TO EAT A DRAGON!
BY CROM, IT'S BEEN A HELL OF A NIGHT!
THAT WOUND NEEDS A BANDAGE...!
I CAN WALK. LET'S GO. I DON'T EVEN WANT ANY OF THEIR HAUNTED JEWELS.
THERE'S PLENTY OF CLEAN LOOT IN THE WORLD FOR YOU AND ME!
AYE, GIRL...
...THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN'T CONQUER...
...TOGETHER!
WE'LL HAVE OUR FEET ON A SHIP'S DECK BEFORE THE STYGIANS OPEN THEIR PORTS FOR THE TRADING SEASON...
AND THEN, BY CROM--
--WE'LL SHOW THE WORLD WHAT PLUNDERING MEANS!

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to the memory of

ROBERT E. HOWARD

creator of Conan, Kull, and "an age undreamed of"
this magazine has been respectfully dedicated

HotComic.net

CIMMERIA

ROBERT E. HOWARD

I REMEMBER
The dark woods, masking slopes of sombre hills;
the grey clouds' leaden everlasting arch
the dusky streams that flowed without a sound,
and the lone winds that whispered down the passes.
Vista on vista marching, hills on hills, slope beyond slope,
each dark with sullen trees,
Our gaunt land lay.

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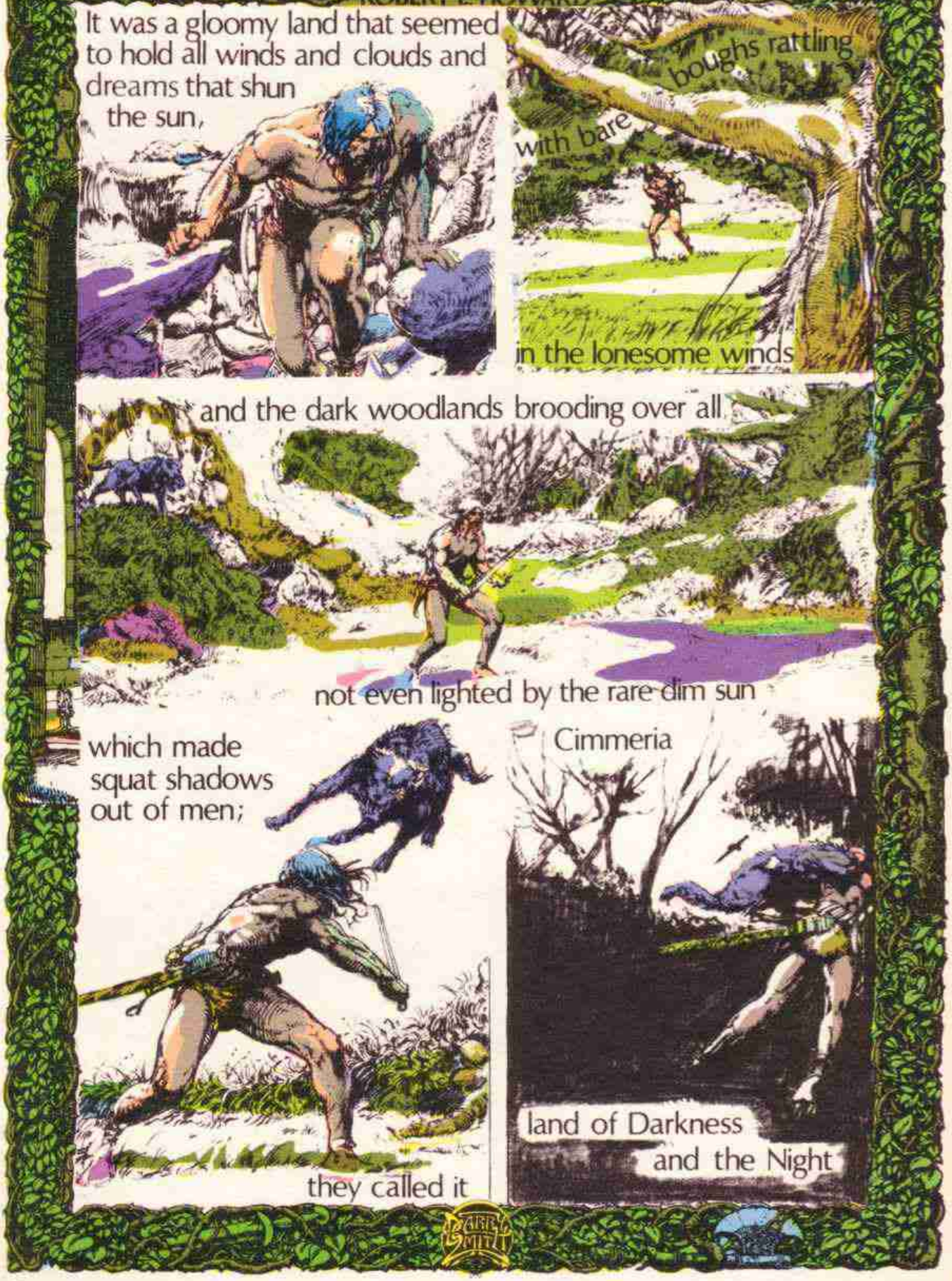
CIMMERIA

ROBERT E. HOWARD


It was a gloomy land that seemed to hold all winds and clouds and dreams that shun the sun,
boughs rattling
with bare
in the lonesome winds
and the dark woodlands brooding over all
not even lighted by the rare dim sun
which made squat shadows out of men;
Cimmeria
land of Darkness and the Night
they called it

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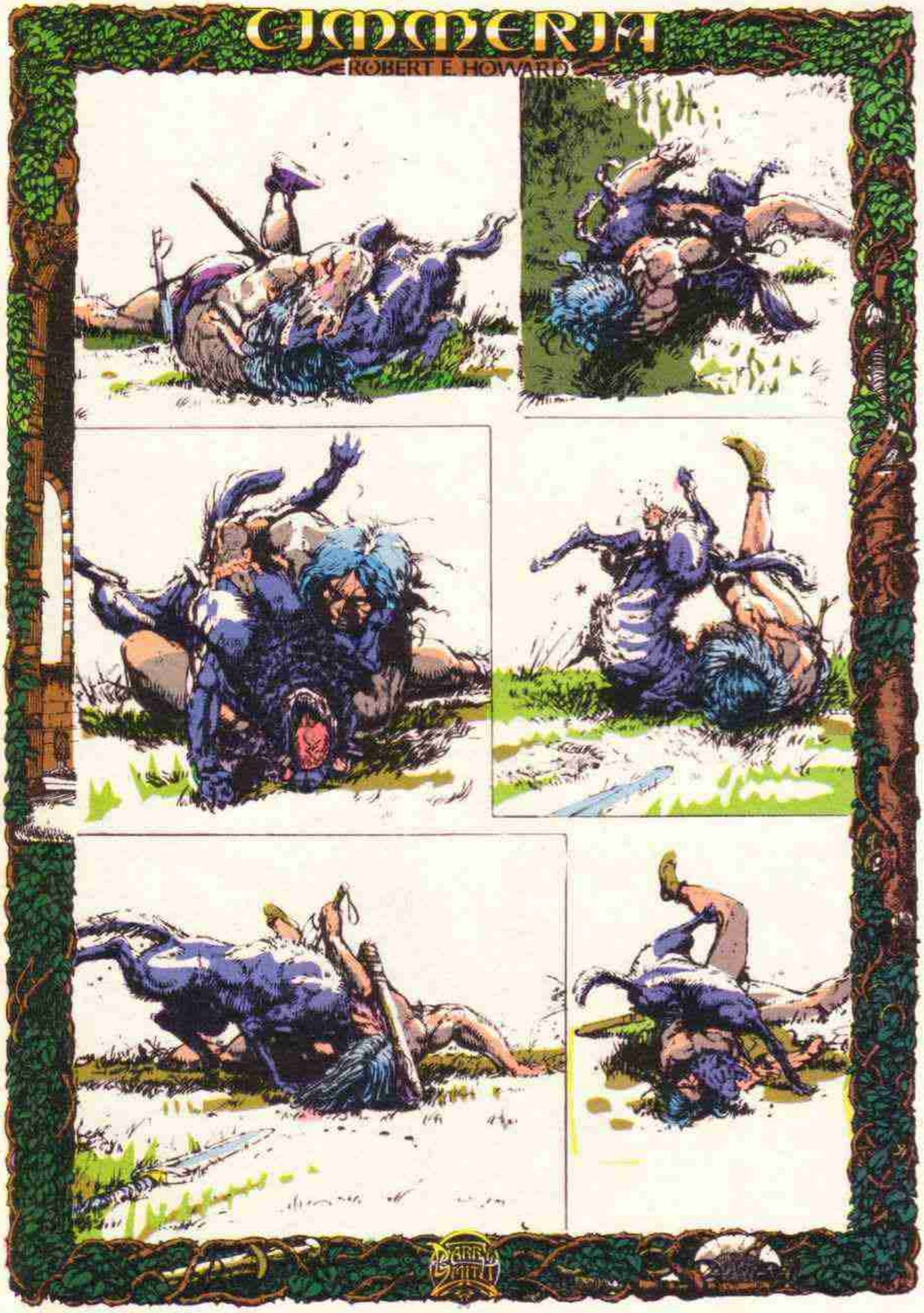

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CIMMERIA

ROBERT E HOWARD

It was so long ago and far away,

I have forgot the very name men called me.

and hunts and wars are a shadow.

The axe and flint-tipped spear are like a dream,

I recall only the stillness of that sombre land;

the clouds that piled forever on the hills,

the dimness of the everlasting woods.

Cimmeria, land of Darkness and deep Night.

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through its depiction we sense the pulsing idealism of the lean and youthful hero exploring the world for adventure, prepared to make it his own, eager to show it "what plundering means!"

The intensity of spirit and the rich sensuousness with which Smith sets down his lines are reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelites, poets and painters of nineteenth century Victorian England, a group which Smith — an Englishman himself — so admires. Responding to what they perceived to be the soullessness of the Industrial Revolution, the Pre-Raphaelites sought to reawaken the human spirit by means of a return to a more spiritual (not necessarily religious) and medieval frame of mind. Handicrafts were encouraged — these men and women not only wrote poems and painted pictures, but they designed tapestries, fabrics, and wallpapers, built furniture and welded stained glass, even bound by hand their own books off their own presses. While I'm not personally aware of Barry Smith's actual abilities in these areas (although he has formed his own Gorblimey Press for posters, prints, portfolios and related projects), he certainly has in his drawings designed and created all of these things. Look at the scene where Valeria stands upon an exquisitely-wrought balustrade peering down upon a man in the haunted hall below. Or look at the panel depicting the chamber — and its accesories — in which Olmec puts up Conan, or the scene of the finely detailed torture rack on which Olmec is bound and gagged. This fineness and exactness of line is used with equal facility to depict character through subtle movement and body gesture — Valeria seated on Conan's lap, first reluctant, then willing, and Conan threading fingers through her hair, kissing a few strands; Conan chomping on an apple raffishly in Olmec's face; the one-eyed Yanath who discovers his own brother's decapitated head and goes insane. Every blossom on a branch, every whisker in a beard, every board in a parquet floor — there is nothing left out in a panel, and we are overwhelmed with the stunning reality of scene after scene. Oh yes — this is how to make a fantasy work! So perfect is the *visual* realization in fact that *all* the senses are inevitably aroused — one can almost hear the wind chimes tinkling in the breezes of Hyboria and smell the scent of its lemon trees — or the rotting, fetid corpses of its dead.

Surely the fetid dead, and undead, should be mentioned lest the false impression be given that Barry Smith offers us only a vision of delicate Hyborian beauty. But no — he is as much a master at painting the dark side of the human (and inhuman) soul. The Burning Skull, the shelves of human heads, the walking corpse of Tolkemec are portrayed with the same passion and faithful vision as are the exotic tapestries and intricate woodworks. For fantasy takes into account people's fears as well as desires, the potential — even penchant — of men and women to do evil, the omnipresence of death and the unknown. And in a world such as that of Conan, where there is little formal science to afford men the semblance of meaningfulness and orderliness, then the unknown seems to loom even larger. Through his use of shadows and moonlight, strange shapes and structures, Smith creates the appropriate mood, expressing physical and spiritual decadence in an uncertain, often illusory, and unknowable world of survival, sorcery, and sinfulness. For all that glimmers in Hyboria is not necessarily thieves' gold; often as not it may be a monstrous crawler in dark catacombs or the dirk of an unknown assassin.

Still, the final judgement of the quality of Barry Windsor-Smith's work as a comic artist rests not on the fastidious precision of his line, the majestic sweep of his landscapes, or the subtlety of his figures' gestures, but on his *storytelling* ability. This is, after all, a sequential art form — panel must move forward to panel with seamless logic and ease, with visual evenness and with fidelity to the words accompanying the pictures. Look at Conan's initial attack upon the dragon, and watch how the images flow — the two potential victims plan their attack, the weapon — a makeshift spear — is uplifted, then tipped into the poison apples, the dragon is aroused, attacks, and then Conan counter-attacks, and now comes a climactic panel which widens the field of vision to include all the previous elements in one dramatic scene — the poisoned apples in foreground, Conan thrusting, Valeria urging him on, the wide-mouthed dragon bellowing in pain. Or watch the pace and movement as Conan makes his way through the hall of Olmec's palace — to find Techotl dying from Olmec's blow — then silently up the stairs and into the torture chamber to confront Olmec himself.

Go on, admit it. Now and then in your life as a comic reader you are held breathless by the visions before your eyes. Barry Windsor-Smith's adaptation of Robert E. Howard's "Red Nails" does that to you. And somehow the despondent words from Howard's own poem, "Lines Written In The Realization That I Must Die," here fail to ring true:

Let my name fade from the printed pages;
Dreams and visions are growing pale.

For while Howard's visions can still inspire artists like Barry Smith and readers like ourselves, his dreams can never grow pale, nor will his name soon fade.

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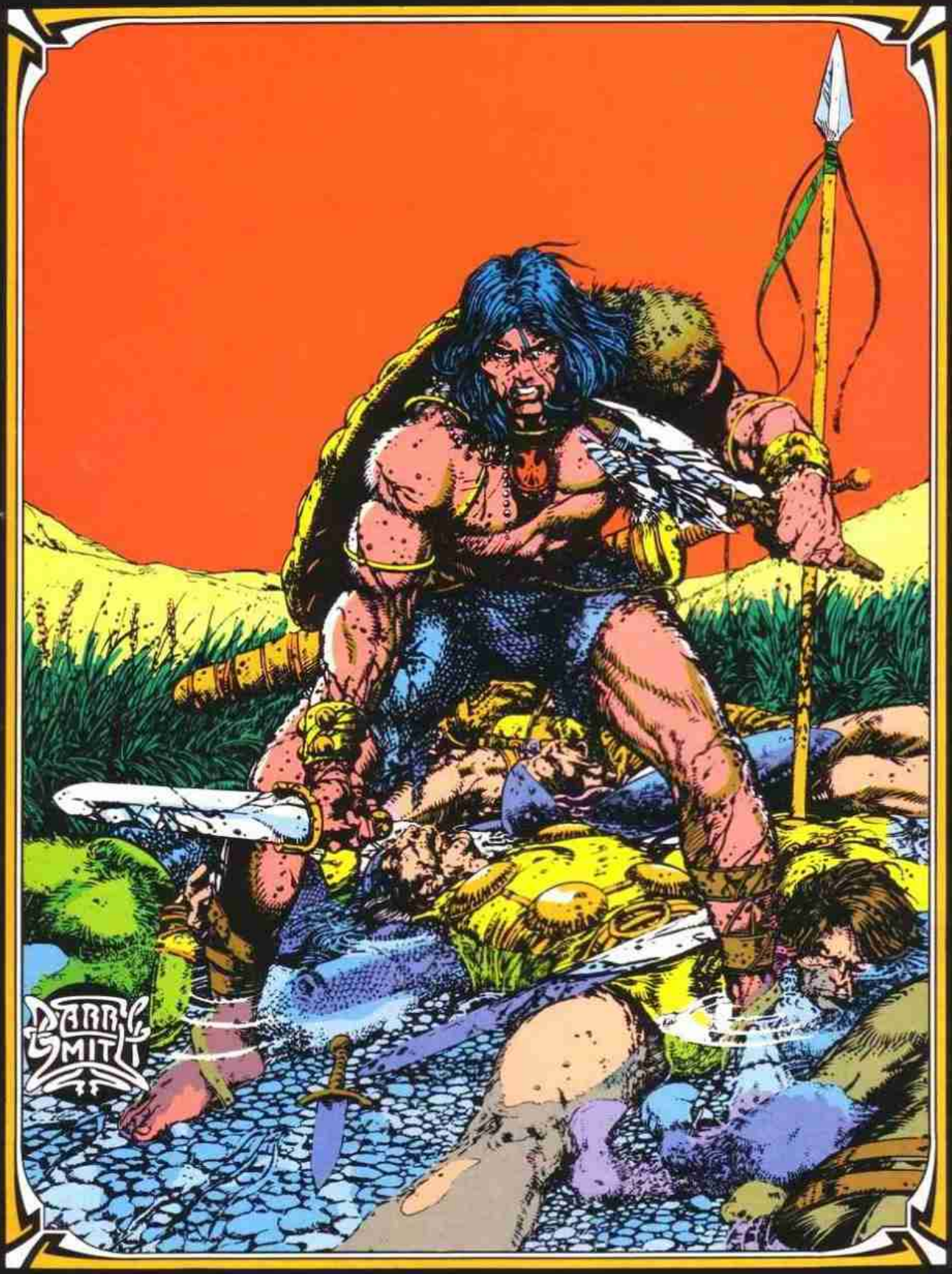

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